

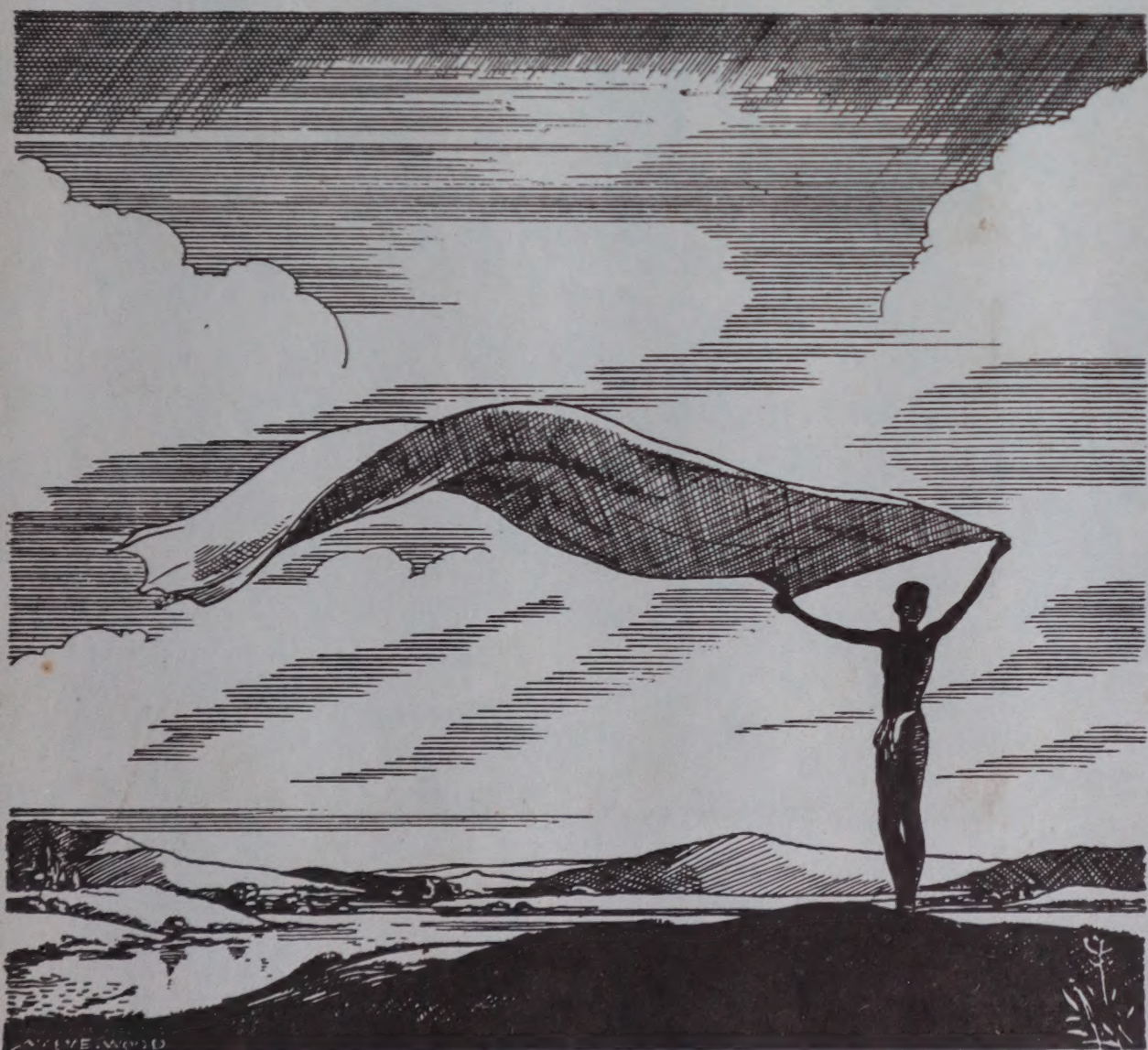
# NARMADA

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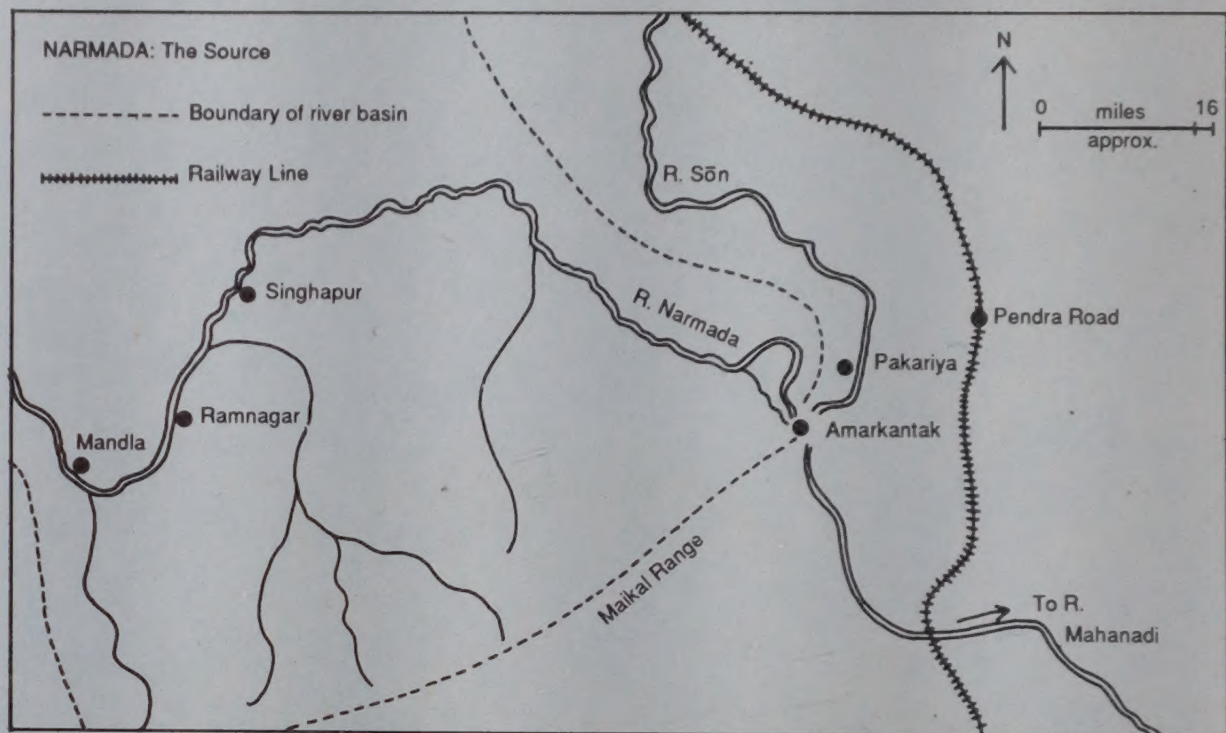
THE LIFE OF A RIVER

by  
Geoffrey Waring Maw

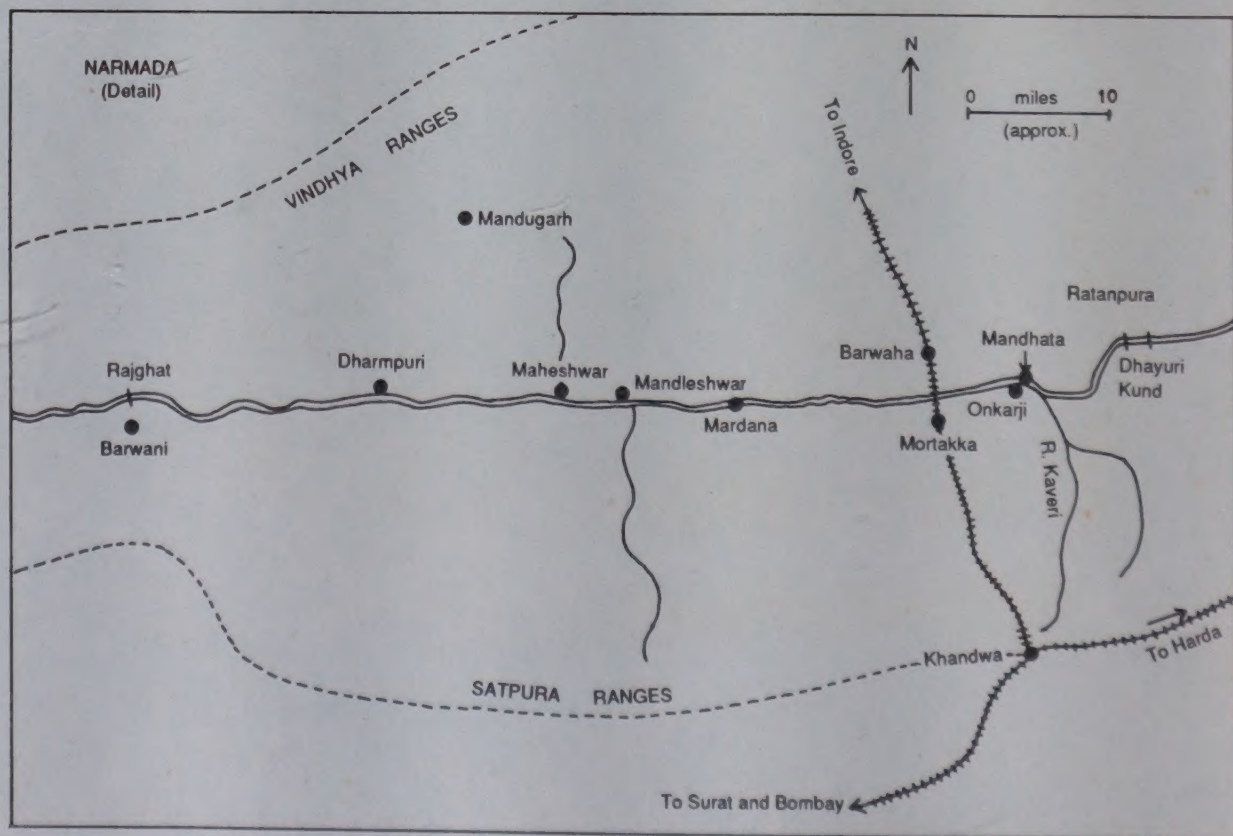
*Edited by*  
Marjorie Sykes







*Narmada: the Source*



*Narmada (Detail)*

## **Narmada: the Life of a River**



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Wandering the Life of a River

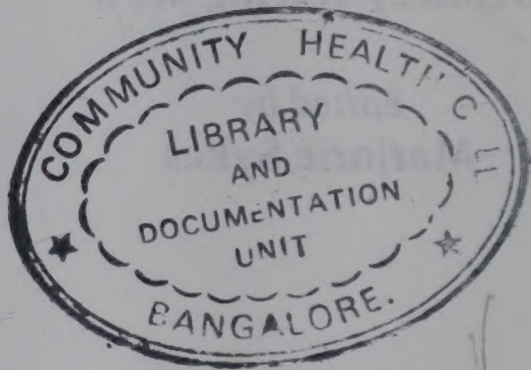




# Narmada: the Life of a River

by  
**Geoffrey Waring Maw**

*Edited by*  
**Marjorie Sykes**



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# Foreword

## The Origin of this Book

One day in 1990 I went to the Central Library of the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham to inspect the papers of Geoffrey Waring Maw, deposited there for safe keeping.

Geoffrey Maw (1886-1959) was an English Quaker who spent nearly forty years (1910-1949) working in the Hoshangabad District in Central India, on the south bank of the Narmada River. He became much interested in two closely-linked aspects of Indian life, the tradition of pilgrimage and the contribution made by the *rishis* and *sadhus* who lived along the pilgrim routes or were to be found at the great religious festivals. Geoffrey made many friends both among *sadhus* and among pilgrims, thanks to his fluency in Hindi, the friendliness and humility of his bearing, and his practical ability to give simple medical aid. He was also a keen amateur photographer and used his camera to record what he saw.

When I studied his papers, I unexpectedly found a good deal of material about the traditions and pilgrimages associated with the Narmada river. There were typescripts, some clearly intended as short articles, copies of journals and letters, and a large number of miscellaneous notes. Some of these are in pencil so faint as to be barely decipherable, others on paper so brittle with age that the sheets lie in fragments. They describe personal experiences, the greater part of which belong to the years of the second world war. Mrs. Maw and the family were in England, unable to join him, and he spent his own summer vacations exploring the sacred sites along the Narmada. Some of the similes and phrases he uses in his record are drawn from war-time Britain, and show how conscious he was of what was being



endured there. He himself was no longer young; he was crippled with arthritis and very lame, but he did not allow his disability to put an end to his explorations, though it sometimes limited them.

These papers are unique; so far as I can discover, no other copy exists. As I studied them, I felt more and more strongly that they should be made available for the general public. The fact that the particular events they record are nearly fifty years old does not lessen their intrinsic interest; they describe ways of life and thought which are rooted in an immemorial past, and yet are a part of present-day India. This simple story may help a few readers to understand something of what is involved in current plans to use the water of the Narmada basin in ways which may have unforeseen repercussions on the whole culture and ecology of the region.

What follows is in Geoffrey's own words, but the arrangement of the chapters is mine, and accounts of the same incident in different manuscripts have been conflated. An odd scrap of paper on which he had jotted down headings for a talk decided me in Chapter III to follow the pilgrim from source to mouth of the river as he had done. There are two places where he himself gives differing versions of the same incident; I have selected that which seems intrinsically more probable, and appears from internal evidence to have been written nearer to the events themselves.

Marjorie Sykes, Editor

# Acknowledgements

I would like to express my grateful thanks to the Librarians of the Central and Woodbrooke libraries, Selly Oak, and of the India Office Library London; to members of the staff of Friends House, London, for much practical help; also to Mr. Charles Velu for reproduction of photographs. Above all I wish to thank Geoffrey Maw's son and daughter, Hugh Maw and Gillian Conacher, for their encouragement and support, and Baba Amte for his permission to use the material in the Epilogue.



Indian words italicised in the text are explained in the Glossary on pp. 83-84, except where a translation has been included in the text itself.

# Introduction

**T**he Narmada valley and its enclosing hills, the Vindhya on the north and the Satpuras on the south, form the northernmost part of the geologically ancient rock structure of peninsular India. Human occupation of the valley can be traced back to correspondingly ancient times. Investigations were carried out in the lower Narmada valley in 1944-45 by Amrit V. Pandya, Director of Archaeology for the State of Rajpipla, who found the remains of an advanced neolithic culture which pre-dated the Harappa culture of Mohenjodaro and the Indus valley by fully a thousand years.

These findings were confirmed by excavations carried out in 1952-53 by the Archaeological Survey of India. After an exhaustive review of all the evidence, including the references in the Puranas and the Buddhist writings, the scientists concluded, as Mr. Pandya had done, that the neolithic urban site at Maheshwar is to be identified with the Puranic city of Mahismati. At the village of Navdatoli, on the southern side of the Narmada opposite Maheshwar, they also discovered the remains of a Buddhist *stupa* and monastery. Southward through a pass in the Satpura hills lay the road to Ajanta, northward through a pass in the Vindhya the road to Ujjain and Sanchi — a major Buddhist pilgrim route.

But long before the time of the Buddha, in an age when the great Indo-Gangetic plains were still uninhabitable swamp, the Narmada culture flourished. Living in an agricultural economy, and with no knowledge of the use of metal, these neolithic peoples were skilled not only in the shaping of their beautiful local stone, but in pottery, in glassware, and in the decorative use of conch shells.

The Narmada river bed, throughout its course, consists of strongly stratified basaltic rock, much of it a greenish

hornstone. This lends itself to the formation of the many rapids and waterfalls which, along with the forests that clothe so many miles of its banks, give the river its unique and varied beauty and nurture an immense range of plant, bird and animal life. In its human dimension it is a life of many centuries of growth; in what follows Geoffrey Maw has recorded some of its enduring fascination.

— Editor



## Lovers of the Narmada

"You are a lover of the Narmada. I too am a lover of the Narmada. We are brothers."

The speaker was a venerable sanyasi with a long white beard, dressed in the saffron robe of the Shaivite ascetic. The year was 1943. I was spending my hot-weather holiday at Onkarji, about midway between the source and the mouth of the Narmada river. One day a few weeks earlier I had been returning with my friend Khushi Lal from a visit to the sacred pool of Dhayuri Kund further up the river, and as we entered the long stretch of calm water at Onkarji we had met the sanyasi, who was on his way up to Dhayuri Kund from his hermitage near Mandleshwar, forty miles downstream. Our boats lay for a few moments side by side. Another sadhu was with him, and we exchanged greetings. The sadhus were accompanied by two ladies, the elder a widow, a retired school teacher who had become a recluse, the younger her daughter. A day or two later we had another glimpse of the party; as they returned from Dhayuri Kund, their boat passed beneath the *dharmashala* where we were staying. The whole river was bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, and the old man waved to me as they disappeared downstream.

Two or three weeks later Khushi Lal and I set off in our boat for a trip downstream as far as Maheshwar, a few miles

beyond Mandleshwar. People told us where we could find the woman-recluse, whom they knew as *Kutiwali-Bai*, the Lady of the Hermitage. We moored our boat and climbed the steep bank to her tiny cottage in its gay little garden of marigolds. When we reached it we found that the old sanyasi was there too, also paying a visit. They were all delighted to see us, and it was as we bade them farewell to resume our journey that he had claimed me as a brother because I loved the Narmada as he did. To me his words were deeply moving. Over thirty years and more I had grown into friendly intimacy with the Narmada and its people, till I felt that I belonged to them and they to me. Now it was as though the old sanyasi had spoken for them all, welcoming me as one of themselves. I never saw him again; the following year I found the cottage deserted.

Who or what is this Narmada? To quote an old school text-book of geography: "Like the Ganges it is a sacred river, and from source to mouth it is by very far the most beautiful river in India." The writer goes on to add the tribute of a former British official, one of those who truly loved the country: "Of all the rivers of India, none is surrounded by more romance; for strange fantastic beauty it ranks high among the rivers of the whole world."

The source of the Narmada is at Amarkantak in the Maikal Range, 3,500 feet above sea level; it flows across India for more than eight hundred miles to the Arabian sea. The first part of its course is through the hills and forests of Rewah and Mandla District; it passes through the gorge of the Marble Rocks near Jabalpur and then enters a long tract of alluvial country between the Vindhya ranges on the north and the Satpuras on the south. This central valley extends two hundred miles to Handia, then comes the second tract of hilly forested country in which lies Onkarji and which ends with the railway bridge between Mortakka and Barwaha. Below the bridge is another stretch of alluvial country where Maheshwar, the old capital of the Holkar Kingdom of Indore, is situated. Then there is a third region of hill and forest on the border of the Bombay Presidency. After that there is no



more striking scenery; the city of Broach (Bharuch) stands on the tidal estuary and thirty miles further on the river joins the sea.

For millions of people "Narmada Mai", Mother Narmada, is a goddess, one of the seven great river-goddesses of India, among whom Ganga, the Ganges, is commonly regarded as supreme. But when Ganga was called down from heaven by the royal saint Bhagirath, she is said to have protested: "Those who bathe in my waters will be cleansed from their sins — but where shall I go for cleansing?" The answer of the Narmadeo Brahmins is that once each year Ganga comes for cleansing to Narmada, entering her waters in the form of a black cow, to emerge white, freed from impurity. There is also an ancient prophecy that after five thousand years of the Kaliyug, the present era, the Ganga will lose her sanctity. This was due to happen in 1895, and many believe that it will yet be fulfilled.

A modern man may perhaps agree. In recent years the Ganga has been subjected to increasing pollution from the great cities on her banks, while at the same time a large proportion of the water from her melting snows is diverted into the great irrigation canals. There are no such cities on the banks of the Narmada, and there is said to be a curse on any project designed to remove water from the river by mechanical means. Some years ago a pump was installed to supply water to a large *dharmashala* at Onkarji. During the rainy season which followed, a great flood dismantled the machinery and swept away the building which had housed it. The experiment has not been repeated.

In the great ancient epics the river has another name. She is Rewa, "the leaping one", who dances down her rocky bed in countless rapids and water-falls. She is the daughter of Shiva, sprung from his body as he meditated at Amarkantak. She is holy throughout her course, "whether inhabited or uninhabited, whether town or forest". Here and there are hillocks, said to be the remains of colossal burnt sacrifices offered by powerful kings of antiquity, the soil beneath the



surface black with the ashes of the fire. On the high banks stand thousands of temples dedicated, some to the river-goddess and even more to Shiva, who is worshipped under many names, most frequently as Shankar. The symbol of the god is the conical stone the *lingam*; many of these stones have been brought up from the pool at Dhayuri Kund. Even ordinary water-worn pebbles so often approximate to the right shape that there is a Hindi rhyme: *Narmada ke kankar, wahi Shiva Shankar*. For such a natural Narmada *lingam* there is no consecration ceremony, it is already sanctified by the river.

Millions of pilgrims throng to the sacred places along the course of the river, but there are very many millions more who depend on Mother Narmada for their daily livelihood. There are the fisherman castes, the *Dhimars* and the *Bhois*, who live by fishing, and by operating ferry boats, and by cultivating melons and cucumbers on the exposed sandbanks in the dry season as the water recedes. There are the *Dhobis*, the washermen who stand knee-deep in water rhythmically pounding the clothes on the smooth flat stones, each movement in time with their breathing, each breath repeating the sacred Name. The clean clothes are spread on the sand; sun and wind impart a whiteness and a brightness which no western "detergent" can rival.

The Narmada has enriched the lives of innumerable ordinary people of every kind. To take one tiny instance: within sound of the rapids at Kharraghat, Hoshangabad, where the river chuckles *kharra-kharra* over the rocks on which the railway bridge is built, is the first piece of land to be owned by Quakers in India. Buildings there housed first a girls' orphanage, later a boys' High School and hostel. Generations of girls and boys bathed in the river, learned to swim and dive, listened to her music, became part of the host of her lovers.

Nor must the list be confined to the human family. Many other humble creatures depend on Narmada Mai for their well-being — the fish, and the peafowl, even the monkeys in whose own eyes nothing is private or sacred, are all to be

respected. Then there are the millions of cattle and other domestic animals that every day come to the river to quench their thirst. There are the turtles, whose heads break surface like submarine periscopes, who are attracted by the rows of *Diwali* lamps set out on the lowest step of the bathing ghat, and overturn the little earthenware saucers to lick up the *ghee*. ("Look, Mummy!" cried my little daughter to my wife as they watched. "They are blowing out the lamps!")

But where does the crocodile come in? He is the vehicle of the goddess — is he too a brother? What about the hunter who shot a crocodile, and discovered in its interior the anklets and bracelets of a woman who had disappeared, leaving her water pot on the *ghat*, a short while before? What about the fisherman who was attacked in midstream, as he crossed the river with one hand grasping his buffalo's tail, and forced to fight for his life with the little axe he carried in his other hand? Whatever we may think of the crocodile, Mother Narmada's insects must not be despised, they too must share her bounty. Close acquaintance with the sand reveals a large population of ants, as I found to my cost when I proposed to spend the night on it. It must have been as hard for them to look on me as a "brother" as it was for me to allow them to share my bed!

The more I talked with the pilgrims I met at Kharraghat and elsewhere, the more I listened to their stories, the more I longed to see it all: the temples and sacred places, the forts and palaces whose crumbling walls had known so much of India's history, the hidden hermitages of those who had renounced the world's prizes to "realise God". I too longed to turn my back on the rush and worry and set out on pilgrimage. The old sanyasi had spoken truly, I too was a lover of the Narmada. He and I had travelled the stream of life in different "boats", but English Quaker and Indian ascetic could reach out, clasp hands, and say with sincerity and affection "We are brothers".

□ □





*Interior of the Markandeshwar temple:  
the image of Vishnu with the lingam below*



*Mandhata island from the dharmasala on the south bank*



## Markandeshwar

I n 1942 my opportunity came, I was free to spend my hot weather holiday where I pleased. I had often listened to the pilgrims' stories of Onkarji, and I decided to begin my Narmada exploration there. I did not go on foot — time was precious and limited — but took the railway train to the nearest station on the south bank. That typical war-time vehicle, a charcoal-burning bus, was standing outside Mortakka station, while the driver and conductor patched a hole in the rusty exhaust pipe with cowdung. "Does it ever break down in the jungle at night?" I asked. "It *could* do", replied the driver, adding contemptuously: "After all, it's only mishanry!"

At last the unpredictable "mishanry" was ready to start, though charcoal fumes still poured up through cracks between the floorboards. As there was no glass in the windows the closely-packed passengers took no harm, there was no breakdown on the seven miles of jungle road, and we drew up in the morning sunlight in the little town, at the top of the steep paved slope which leads down to the bathing ghats of Onkarji.

For me it was a case of "love at first sight". There was a breath-taking view from the top of the ghats. A hundred feet

below lay the river, here a deep, still pool half a mile long and fifty to a hundred yards across, on the other side of which rose the abrupt cliffs of the island of Mandhata. The island is over a mile long, its highest point four or five hundred feet above water level. High up in the centre was the white palace of the Rajah, on the right the white tower of Onkareshwar temple, on the left down by the water a large *dharmashala*. Other buildings clung, as it were in mid-air, to the side of the cliff.

This was the place for me, for my holiday. Where should I stay? At the top of the *ghats* was a rambling old building, the Jasrupji Baijnathji *dharmashala*; over the archway leading to its inner courtyard was an inscription in Hindi: "You have come here to wash away your sins. Do not add to them instead." I looked at it, and set my heart on a suite on the first floor. It was approached from outside by a narrow stairway with an iron railing; the door could be securely locked, and there was a private balcony and an octagonal room in a corner tower, right on the edge of the cliff overhanging the great pool, with many varied views of the island and the river.

Year after year this desirable room became my temporary home. From there down to water level were exactly one hundred steps. Most people on this side of the river bathed from the lower steps, and at first I did the same. Ferry boats crossed the pool to the island, carrying pilgrims, and the Dhimar children swam beside them, shouting to the passengers: *Phenko, Sethji, Phenko!*" (Throw, Mr. Merchant, throw!). Then they dived laughing after the coins which were thrown. Once or twice, for fun, I joined them, mimicking their appeals, and pretending to join in the scramble for the coins. But I could not emulate their prowess in the underwater search. Boys and girls alike, they all swam like otters. Nothing would be visible but a little pair of feet waving, or a bare behind sticking up in the air. All the same, I longed for a more private bathing place, for my white skin made me feel conspicuous, and soon I found one.



Markandeya Shila, the Rock of Markandeya, marks the spot which is said to be Mother Narmada's thigh. The story goes that far back in antiquity the *rishi* Markandeya had been seeking a place for meditation by the river, but found that all desirable sites had already been occupied by other saints and sages. Narmada Mai herself provided him with a rock, whose flat top rose from the water near the bank, a short distance below the sacred *thirth* of Onkarji on Mandhata. Year after year for ten thousand years Markandeya never left his rock; absorbed in the worship of Shiva he was oblivious of physical needs. When the floods rose in the rains the rock rose also, and sank back as the water subsided.

On the steep river bank overlooking Markandeya Shila, a few feet above the highest flood level, fifty feet above the water in the dry season, stands an ancient Markandeshwar temple under an old champa tree. I had engaged a Dhimar named Phulchand to help me, and he took me there on my first "voyage" of exploration. The temple was a tiny place with a cracked dome, and an attractive porch carried on six carved pillars, almost hidden in a dense tangle of trees and bushes. As I climbed towards it from the bank I met a sadhu coming down to fetch water. He was tall and dignified, with a flowing white beard, and he wore the saffron loincloth and *rudraksha* beads of a devotee of Shiva. To my surprise he gave me a friendly greeting in English: "God will bless you", and invited me to visit his little hermitage alongside the temple. A day or two later I did so, and our friendship began.

Swami Nandgiri told me that he had once been a clerk in the railway service. When he retired he had become a sanyasi of the Niranjani sect, to which the Markandeshwar temple belonged, and he was allowed to live there and keep any income from offerings. These however were very few, for the temple is so hidden away that not many pilgrims find it. So long as he had a *chela*, who would go to the bazaar and beg for both, all was well; but shortly before my visit the *chela* had died, and no one had taken his place.

We soon found we could help one another. Barking dogs



and summer heat made nights in the *dharmashala* almost unbearable for me; Swami Nandgiri invited me to sleep at his peaceful hermitage, lulled by the river murmuring over the rapids below, and awakened at dawn by the cheerful notes of small birds in the bushes, and peafowl trumpeting in the taller trees. Below on the river bank were some rocky ledges which became my private bathing *ghat*, from which I could drop off straight into deep water. To Swami and myself this place was Mōr Ghat, partly because "mōr" was a common corruption of my own name, partly because the peafowl (Hindi *mōr*) often came there to drink. It was astonishing that these wild birds appeared to have no fear of a human being who was up to his neck in water. Perhaps they took my head to be one of Mother Narmada's coconuts bobbing down stream? Sometimes just before sunset (my last bathe of the day) I would hear a rustling sound, and look up to see a couple of amorous peacocks, their tails fully spread, dancing before the peahens who had come to drink. The hens appeared indifferent, but the cocks were not discouraged. Smaller birds were equally fearless; I could float quietly near to grey wagtails as they searched for insects along the edge of the water, or a gorgeous kingfisher with a crimson beak and bright blue back, watching intently from a low branch or jutting rock.

The chief disadvantage of such private bathing places is that they also appeal to crocodiles who (from different motives) have a similar wish not to be disturbed. There was a crocodile about six feet long that I saw around Mōr Ghat, so I did not dare go far out into the pool.

I made a compact with Swamiji: I would provide material for our meals while he did the cooking. This suited us both, and we kept up the arrangement whenever I was there. He soon decided that my hot weather holiday would not be complete without at least one mango feast. I brought what was needed, he prepared the mango syrup and cooked the *phulkas*. When all was ready he placed before me a pile of *phulkas* and a *lota* full of syrup, replenishing it from time to

time until I could eat no more. The feast became an annual event.

Outside Swamiji's cottage were some young mango trees which his *chela* had planted, protected by hedges of dry thorn. The hedges were full of little birds: blue tits, grey tits, tailor-birds (the daintiest little things), several sunbirds, a tiny yellow-green bird with a white circle round its eye, called a white-eye, and of course bulbuls and robins and magpie-robins. They all came boldly up to the cottage to wait for the scraps from our meal. Swamiji loved his birds, and they were very tame. A pair of kingfishers were nesting in the bank below the top terrace, and the male kept a watchful eye on suspicious characters — crows — who had designs on the eggs. The crows would alight stealthily in the tree above, but the kingfisher had only to turn suddenly and stare, and they took a hasty departure — conscience made them cowards!

Swamiji could not afford to keep a lantern burning at night. When I was with him we sat under the stars or in the moonlight to enjoy the cool breeze off the river before lying down to sleep. One evening I was late, and did not reach his hermitage till sometime after dark. It was clear that he was troubled about something, and he soon told me what it was. A few minutes before I arrived, feeling thirsty, he had dipped his *lota* into his drinking water bucket and taken a good drink. Then he heard a queer noise in the dark, and discovered that a couple of rats had fallen into the bucket and were struggling to get out. He was very worried. "Do you think that water might poison me?" he asked, "or make me ill?" "No", I said, "ordinary healthy rats could not make you ill." He was not satisfied. "But rats spread plague, don't they? Could I catch plague from that water?" "Certainly not", I said. "Healthy live rats don't spread plague, you could not possibly catch it that way." But it was very hard to allay his fears at the time, though the following year we enjoyed a good laugh over it.

One morning, not long after this incident, I was sitting at my window in the *dharmashala* overlooking the river, and



saw Swami Nandgiri in a boat, along with several other sadhus, going downstream towards Mor Ghat. That evening he told me that one of the Niranjani sadhus had died, and that they had been conducting the funeral according to the custom of their sect. The body had been taken out in a boat, heavy stones had been bound up with it in a cloth, and it had been sunk in the deep water of the pool. According to the local people that pool is eighty four *yojanas* deep, that is to say at a minimum reckoning 420 miles — which sounds unlikely, to say the least of it. Anyway Swami Nandgiri assured me that the ceremony had been held a good long way from my bathing place, so that I should not be visited by crocodiles. But I never felt able to discuss with him the comparative risks of live rats in the drinking water and the body of a deceased sadhu in the public water supply!

The Markandeshwar temples of Rishi Markandeya are unusual, in that they contain representations of both Vishnu and Shiva. One afternoon near sunset we sat outside our Markandeshwar temple while Swami Nandgiri told me the story which explains why this is so:-

A Brahmin named Mrikandu, who lived at Benares, had no son and sorrowed over his misfortune. One day a Mahatma came to his house. Mrikandu said: "Maharaj, I have no son, I don't know what to do." "You are not destined to have a son," replied the Mahatma, but Mrikandu went on pleading: "Is there no way, no way at all?" "There is one way," said the Mahatma, "the ceaseless worship of Vishnu Bhagwan; but even so, your son will live only eighteen years, and when they are ended your sorrow will be such that it is better not to have a son." Mrikandu replied, "I don't care, only let me have a son for eighteen years, I don't mind what happens afterwards."

Nine months later Mrikandu's wife bore a son, and they named him Markandeya. Because he came by the grace of Vishnu he is considered an *avatar* of Vishnu. His parents taught him the *shastras* and he became very learned. When he had entered his eighteenth year, however, he noticed that



his parents seemed very sad, and asked the reason. "Son," they replied, "the gods have limited your life to eighteen years." "In that case," said Markandeya, "you should consider me dead already." He left home, retired to Vindhyaachal on the banks of the Narmada, and gave himself to the worship of Shankarji; he neither ate, nor drank, nor slept.

When the eighteen years were completed Yamraj, the Lord of Death, sent his messengers to Markandeya. They came to the temple where he was worshipping, and called him. When Markandeya took no notice, they decided to enter the temple and take him, but when they tried to cross the threshold fire sprang up to bar their way. The messengers went and reported to Yamraj, who came himself to the temple, and also found the barrier of fire in his path. He then flung his noose over Markandeya, and Markandeya clasped his arms around the lingam, saying: "If this is my destiny I will take Shankarji with me."

Shankarji then appeared in person with his trident, and asked what all the trouble was about. "You are the Renewer and the Destroyer," said Yamraj. "I am merely carrying out your commands. This man's life was limited to eighteen years." "Fetch the register and show me," said Shankar. Yamraj went to Yampuri and brought it, but when he opened it the eighteen years appeared as eighteen *Kalpas*. (1 *Kalpa* = 1000 *Yugas* = 4,320,000,000 years). Seeing this Yamraj fell at Shankarji's feet, saying "I have made a mistake. Forgive me." The gods all assembled to celebrate such an occasion of joy, and Shankarji said to Markandeya: "From today I have a new name, Markandeshwar." The Markandeshwar temple at Onkarji has its *lingam*, but it also has images of Vishnu, and on each side of the two great gods stand Markandeya and his father Mrikandu.

One day in 1944, when I was just about to leave Onkarji at the end of my holiday, I was paying some farewell visits to friends in the town. To my surprise I met Swami Nandgiri, who did not usually leave his ashram during the middle of

the day. He told me that a large snake about eight feet long had taken possession of the temple and coiled itself round the *lingam*; he had poked it with a stick and thrown water on it, but it merely hissed a little and did not move. What could he do? He begged me to go back with him, and I found things exactly as he described, but I had no practicable suggestions to make. Perhaps, I thought, the snake is an incarnation of Markandeya Rishi, whose abode is now in the celestial regions, among the seven *rishis* in the stars of "the Great Bear" — he is clinging to Shankarji as Markandeya himself once did? But poor Swami Nandgiri was distressed; the temple was so small that he couldn't even enter without coming within striking distance of the snake, how was the ceremonial *puja* to be performed?

When I left Onkarji the following day the snake was still in possession, and I never heard the end of the story. It was more than four years before I could visit again. In October 1948, when my work in India was over and I was making plans to return to England, I managed to find a few days to bid farewell to my friends. For Swami Nandgiri, I came too late; some months earlier, I was told, he too had been put to rest in the fathomless depths of Mother Narmada. In one rainy season the little footpath to the temple had become choked with weeds, the walls of the hermitage were crumbling, the floor of the temple was covered with dead leaves. There was the *lingam*, but the conch which had sounded for worship was silent; there were no little birds waiting expectantly for crumbs. All was deserted, desolate. I sat for a short while on the temple steps and then turned away, thankful for the memories of the many peaceful, happy hours I had spent there.

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## The *Parikrama* Pilgrimage

**M**arkandeya Rishi is looked upon as the patron saint of the Narmada, and while he was still on this earth he is credited with the first performance of the great Narmada pilgrimage which continues to this day: the *parikrama* or circumambulation of the holy river from source to mouth and back again. Markandeya himself, it is said, was not content with the circuit of the Narmada, he travelled both banks of every tributary also, and completed the whole journey in three years, three months and thirteen days.

The modern pilgrim is excused the tributaries; he is required only to travel the length of both banks of the main river. He may begin the pilgrimage at any point on either bank, but he must always keep the holy river on his right, so that he walks towards the mouth along the south or left bank, and towards the source along the north or right bank. He should not hurry, nor should he loiter; he should aim at taking neither more nor less time than the *rishi* himself; he should not travel during the *chaturmasya* — the four months of the rainy season. The footpath is well-worn, it runs along both banks for over seventeen hundred miles, and those who follow it are known as the *parikrama-bāsis*, the "dwellers on the circuit".

Pilgrimages, said the sage Pulastya in response to a question from King Yudhishtira, are ordained so that ordinary humble people, who cannot make the immense and costly sacrifices recorded of the royal saints of ancient times, may be able to attain the same spiritual goal. The discipline of all pilgrimages includes an "inward and outward" cleanliness, the "inward" consisting of truthfulness, self-control (especially of anger and the sexual impulse), humility and contentment of mind, revealed in acts of compassion and forgiveness, the service of the poor, the old and the weak, and loving-kindness towards all living creatures.

Markandeya exhorts the *parikrama-bāsis* to "leave home with joy in worthy company". Like all pilgrims they should eat, or offer in worship, only food cooked in a home or by themselves on the journey. They should carry no money or extra clothing, and accept the food they are freely offered. They should have a daily *darshan* ("view") of the holy river, and whenever possible a daily bathe in it, keeping near the bank. If the path leaves the river, as in some wild and rocky regions it must, they should carry a little of the river water with them. They may not cross the river or visit its small islands; each tributary may be crossed only once, and there may be no turning back once the journey has begun. Only when the path traverses uninhabited forests is it permissible to carry a small supply of extra food. Finally the pilgrim should share in the worship at the sacred places along his route, and seek out the sages and holy recluses who live on the river banks, learning from them to "keep the Lord in the heart" and inwardly dwell on the holy Name.

These pilgrims may often be met at Hoshangabad, resting or cooking their meals in the *dharmashalas* by the bathing *ghat*. They kindled my interest, and there, and during the war-years on my hot-weather holidays at Onkarji, I got to know some of them well. Most *parikrama-bāsis* are people in later life, able to pass on family obligations to a younger generation, for once they have started they may have no news of the family for months. Some travel alone, some in parties; they are of many kinds.



Some are *sadhus*. One day I was out in a boat, enjoying the magnificent scenery. We drifted slowly downstream with the current, close to the northern bank. A *sadhu* approached, going up stream by the river side path. His body was grey with ashes, over one shoulder he carried a coarse black blanket, in one hand his shining brass *lota* and the tongs with which he managed his little fire. With the other hand he was turning his rosary, repeating one of the names of God, and with each repetition one seed of the rosary slipped through his fingers. He was completely absorbed, unaware of the beauty around him or the boat passing below.

Another lone traveller, very different, was an attractive old man with long grey hair and a bushy beard, whom I met in the *dharmashala* at Onkarji. He came from Surat and was a carpenter, but had left his son to carry on the business. He had started the pilgrimage at Onkarji, but on the north bank; now after nearly two years he was opposite the point from which he started. He too carried a *lota* and blanket, and a tiny parcel of personal possessions.

Another pilgrim was a farmer whom I knew intimately, whose home was in the extreme east of Hoshangabad District, and who talked to me a lot about his experiences. The third and last of the wild, uninhabited regions through which the Narmada flows is the Shulpani forest on the border between the small Barwani State and British India. This, my farmer friend Daulat Ram said, was the most dangerous part of the whole journey, not because of the wild animals, though they were plentiful, but because of the highway robbers. The Barwani State Police provided an escort up to the State boundary, but beyond it pilgrims might be robbed even of their scanty possessions. He himself had got through safely, but a party ahead of him, and one behind him, had both been attacked.

Daulat Ram had had another testing experience. Travelling upstream along the northern bank he had reached a point almost opposite his own village, where he had news of his wife's death some months earlier. The impulse was to

go home; he could have been there within a day. But he kept the discipline of the pilgrimage, and continued on his way to the source and back, almost another year.

Sometimes while I was at Onkarji I was able to be of some small service to some of the pilgrims. One year, shortly before I was due to leave, a party had come in, one of whom had been struggling with malaria for many days. My cinchona tablets had a very good effect, and he was delighted. A day or two later when I left the place, I gave him what tablets remained, in case the fever should return. At other times I could supply such simple needs as a small empty bottle in which to carry some *ghee*. One of my most interesting encounters was a pilgrim family, father, mother and small child. They were poor, low caste village folk. They had started their pilgrimage at Onkarji, on the south bank, and had now successfully completed it. (The child must have been very small when they started, over three years before.) They had only a few miles further to go to reach home. But the father had fallen ill, and they asked for help. I gave him what treatment I could, and in a few days he had almost recovered; they were both touchingly grateful.

How often in imagination I have followed the pilgrims on their long journey! It *may* start anywhere, so let us begin at the source and travel with Mother Narmada to the sea. The source is that spring on the Amarkantak plateau. Close by are two other springs, where rise two other rivers. One of these is the Sōn, one of the only two *male* rivers in India (the other male river is the Brahmaputra). The second is the little river Jwala, which joins the Narmada a few miles downstream. The three rivers are linked in legend: a marriage, it is said, had been arranged between Sōn and Narmada, but Narmada, a traditional Indian bride, had never seen the groom. Being curious, she sent her little friend Jwala, the barber's daughter, to find out what he looked like. Sōn saw the beautiful little girl approaching, supposed her to be the bride, and gave orders for the marriage ceremonies to begin. The goddess Narmada was deeply offended; turning her back on Sōn she



dashed away over rocks and precipices, north and then west, forming rapids and waterfalls which still resound with her displeasure. Sōn, the rejected suitor, flung himself over a high cliff, and flowed east and north east to join the Ganga on her way to the Bay of Bengal.

The first few miles of the Narmada's descent are exceedingly steep and rough. The young river falls over an eighty-foot cliff and descends to the lower ranges in cascade after cascade; hermits live in caves beside her, and the pilgrim sits at their feet and then moves on. The path leads through many miles of forest where wild animals abound and villages are few and small. Here and there by the rocky, tempestuous river is a group of temples, a *dharmashala*, perhaps a *mela* on the day of the full moon. Level ground is reached at Ramnagar, a ruined palace of the old rulers of Mandla. From here to Mandla town is the first stretch of calm deep blue water, fifteen miles of it, thickly forested on both sides and very beautiful.

Beyond Mandla, Mother Narmada takes a sharp turn to the north, and presently comes to one of her most famous and lovely water-falls, *Dhuān dhāra*, the Fall of Mist, after which she plunges into the great gorge of the Marble Rocks, where for two miles she flows quiet and deep, and only twenty yards wide, between her shining many-coloured cliffs. Here she is only a few miles from Jabalpur, but she does not touch the city; she turns westward to enter the great central valley where, for two hundred miles, past Hoshangabad to Handia, she passes through fertile agricultural country between the ranges of the Vindhya Hills on the north, and the Satpuras on the south. Here too are islands and rapids and deep pools, and the first of the old and famous river crossings at Brahman Ghat.

At the Brahman Ghat (now commonly written Barmān Ghat) there is an island in the river, whose main channel is on the north side of it, with a much smaller one on the south. A little distance upstream there are rapids, the *Sāt dhāra* or

Seven Falls, and between the rapids and the island are deep pools, Brahm Kund, Bhim Kund, Arjun Kund, Suraj Kund, where bathing is auspicious but must be done with caution, for there are crocodiles in all. The pilgrim westward bound along the south bank has a fine view across the river to bathing *ghats* from which rise the tower of the Narmada temple and the *Hathi Darwaz*, the Elephant Gate — for it was here that elephants captured and trained in the Bundelkhand forests to the north were brought across the river to Mandla. In the old days, so the story goes, there were no temples on the south side of the river. Now, the pilgrim may visit two. One is the Durgawati temple, built by a famous Queen of Mandla about three hundred and fifty years ago; the other is the *Pisanhari* (grain-grinder) temple, said to be of the same age and built by a poor devout widow who earned her living by grinding grain. In this temple I found a small school for Brahmin boys, and the teacher told me the story:

The Maharani Durgawati sent two of her agents to buy elephants in Bundelkhand. When they came to Brahman Ghat however they were distressed to find no temple on the Mandla side of the river, and they used the money to build one in the Queen's name, and to obtain an idol from Jaipur. The dedication could not take place unless the Maharani was present, so they sent her a message. When Durgawati learned what they had done she was pleased with their piety, an auspicious day was fixed for the dedication in a month's time, and she herself remained at Brahman Ghat till the day came.

Hearing of her presence, the *Pisanhari* petitioned her for materials for her own little temple, and the Maharani granted her wish. Masons and labourers volunteered their services, and within the month that temple too was finished, but there was no idol for it. Mahadeo, the God Shiva, appeared to the *Pisanhari* in a dream and said: "My name is Chandramoleswar, I am lying in Suraj Kund, you should arrange for me to be lifted out." The *Pisanhari* reported this



to the Maharani, who had it proclaimed by beat of drum that whoever could take the image from Suraj Kund should have a reward of a hundred rupees.

A fisherman volunteered to dive. He had no hope of finding the image, but he was in despair because his daughter was still unmarried, although she was eighteen. "The shame is more than I can bear", he thought. "Let me die in the Kund." He took a boat to the centre of the pool and jumped in, and lo! Chandramoleshwar came into his grasp and he rose to the surface with it. The boatmen caught him and drew him out; the Maharani gave him the reward and also the dowry for the girl's wedding, and both temples were dedicated together.

Close by is a stone image of the boar *avatar* of Vishnu. Pilgrims are told that if they can squeeze through the narrow space between its belly and the ground, it is a sign that their worship is accepted and their sins forgiven. As I am quite slenderly built myself I decided to follow their example, and handed my camera to my companion to record the scene. But I had not sufficiently studied the technique, which limbs should go first, and I got stuck — much to the delight of the spectators.

As the pilgrim leaves Brahman Ghat he may also see across the water the great wooden image of the goddess Narmada overlooking the holy spot at the western tip of the island where the two arms of the river unite again. She has four arms, and is enthroned on a fearsome crocodile, its mouth open to display its great teeth.

Many miles down stream again the pilgrim reaches Hoshangabad, with the railway bridge across the Kharraghat rapids and the ancient ferry crossing above them. Fifty miles or more further on is another historic crossing from Handia on the south bank to the ancient town of Nimawar on the north. It was here that the Maratha armies crossed in their victorious invasion of the "foreign" lands north of the river. Here the west-bound pilgrim may look across to the rocky

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promontory on the other side where stands the Siddhanath temple which he will visit on his return journey. Handia and Nimawar are half way between the source and the mouth of the river — they mark "Mother Narmada's navel".

They also mark the end of the cultivated central valley. The hills close in once more, and the river enters a second great tract of wild forest country. The next seventy miles, down to the railway bridge which carries the line from Khandwa to Indore, are rich in history and legend, and of breath-taking beauty. It will be described further in later chapters. Below the railway bridge comes another stretch of alluvial farming country. The pilgrim is now in the old Holkar kingdom, and thirty miles or more below the bridge, on the northern bank, is the former capital city, Maheshwar, where the great Queen Ahalyabai reigned in the latter part of the eighteenth century, and died in 1795. Further down still, and also on the northern bank, is the little town of Dharmapuri.

At Dharmapuri, as the pilgrim ascends the northern bank of the river on his return journey, he does what seems a startling thing, unless you know the secret. He turns his back on the river which he is supposed to keep in view, and travels northward eighteen miles to the ancient palace-fortress of Mandugarh, which towers over the valley from a spur of the Vindhyas, two thousand feet above sea level. Here ruled the Sultans of Malwa; one of them, Hoshang Shah Ghorī, had built the fort at Hoshangabad on the south bank of the river. The story the pilgrim remembers is not about Hoshang Shah, but about one of his successors, Baz Bahadur Shah, who fell in love with a Rajput princess named Rupamati who lived at Dharmapuri. She would marry him, she said, but on one condition. She was a devotee of Narmada Mai, and could live at Mandugarh only if Narmada's water flowed there also. Narmada Mai was so pleased with her devotion that she allowed a spring of her own water to burst forth at Mandugarh. Here each evening Rupamati lit a lamp in her pavilion by the spring, and watched for the responding light



lit by her guru in his temple on the island in the river at Dharmapuri. The pilgrim must therefore follow Narmada Mai to Mandugarh and bathe there in the Rewa Kund, the pool of the miraculous spring.

On the westward journey the end of the alluvial region is reached at Rajghat, where the Rajah of Barwani provides for the pilgrims at the *dharmashala* near the bathing steps. Then the river enters the great and dangerous Shulpani forest which has already been described. I made inquiries in 1947 about the best way to visit a part of this region, but in the end I was unable to do so. Beyond that the river reaches its estuary across the low lands of Gujarat, where there is little of special interest except a great banyan tree associated with the poet-saint Kabir, and the site of Rajah Bali's horse sacrifice near Bharuch.

Thirty miles below Bharuch, the waters of the Narmada mingle with the sea in the Gulf of Cambay. Here at its mouth the estuary is seventeen miles across. Here, and here only, may the pilgrim cross the stream. He does so, and sets his face to the east for the long march back.

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## Onkarji-Mandhata: The Pilgrim Route

**T**he island now called Mandhata was once, it is said, called Vaidurya Mani Parvat. How did the name come to be changed? People told me the story, as recounted by Markandeya Rishi himself to the Raja Yudhishtira in the Vana Parva of the *Mahabharata*.

There was once a mighty king named Yauvanashwa, who worthily fulfilled his kingly duties and also became a Mahatma of great spiritual power. At last he handed over his kingdom to the care of his ministers and retired to the forest, leaving no son to succeed him. The ministers sacrificed to Varuna and prepared consecrated water for the queen, so that she might drink it and bear a son. That very day the king was seized with tormenting thirst, and seeking to relieve it came to the place where the enchanted water had been set aside, raised the vessel to his lips and drained it, and returned to his meditation. A hundred years went by, then by the mercy of God the king delivered a son from his side. The child shone like the sun in the east, and all the gods came to behold him. "Who will suckle the child?" they asked, and Indra dipped his own forefinger in nectar, put it into the child's mouth and gave him the name Mandhata ("he shall suck").

Mandhata grew to manhood and became skilled in all knowledge; he ruled the kingdom in righteousness, so that

none lacked food or clothing or any other necessity, the rains fell and the earth gave fruit abundantly. And Mandhata came to the bank of the Narmada in the holy region of Onkar in the mountain country of Vaidurya, and there performed sacrifices in the name of the mystic syllable Om, in which all gods are found. Onkar appeared in person and offered him a boon, and Mandhata replied: O Mahadeva, grant that this mountain Vaidurya shall in future be named Mandhata, a place where the gods and the twelve *Jyotirlingas* may dwell. And Onkar responded, so be it.

Then, the story continues, the island came to be wasted by a terrible god, Kal Bhairava, and his consort Kali Devi who fed on human flesh. One person only remained, the ascetic Daryao Nath, who was able by his spiritual power to shut up Kali Devi in a cave, which may still be seen in the cliff below Onkareshwar temple, its mouth closed by an iron grill. Daryao Nath refused to release her until she promised to abstain from human flesh and accept temple worship instead. Her consort Kal Bhairava was bought off by periodic human sacrifice.

It is clear that Mandhata was once a large city. The flat top of the island is covered with ancient ruins and old carved stones. The old walls, built of huge blocks without a trace of lime, look as though they would stand for ever. Four gateways remain, and the ruins of a palace with extensive elephant stables. In 1165 A.D. a Chauhan Rajput, Bharat Singh, obtained possession of Mandhata from its ruler Nathu Bhil, probably by marrying the chieftain's daughter. Nathu's descendants, the Chauhan Rajputs of the Bhilala caste, are the hereditary custodians of the temples on the island, and by courtesy are called Rajah, although their official rank is Rao Sahib.

Authorities disagree about whether Onkareshwar on the island, or Amareshwar on the south bank, or both, are original *Jyotirlinga* temples, but in any case all twelve are represented in the ten-mile pilgrim circuit. I found one of them, Kedareshwar, very attractive, perhaps partly because of



my memories of the original Kedarnath temple at the foot of the mighty Himalayan peak from which it takes its name. In the shadow of Kedareshwar was a one-room hermitage, which had been built by a wealthy local Brahmin for a sadhu who had later gone elsewhere. I got permission from the owner to occupy it, but in the end this proved impracticable. It was within shouting distance of Swami Nandgiri across the river, but to go backward and forward on the ferry would have consumed too much time.

The ferry boats land their passengers at the bathing *ghats* at the foot of the main street of the island, a stone paved way about six feet wide where all the shops are. There are no wheeled vehicles, but one may possibly get a sharp reminder that some sacred bull considers he has right of way. He is no respecter of persons, but proceeds towards his objective with the sublime indifference of a steam roller.

In this street is a temple in memory of the Rajah's ancestors, and a public reading room and library opening off it. The librarian Ram Paresh Pande had a little shop next door, selling books and stationery and miscellaneous oddments. He was very pleased to meet someone interested in the history of the town; he had written a guidebook, a mine of information, and I often sat and talked with him.

The pilgrims have a heavy programme before them. There are so many temples to be visited, so many offerings to make and duties to perform that the *pandas*, the professional Brahman guides, advise spreading the business over three days. Pilgrims provide themselves with all the things needed for offerings: coconuts, the leaves and fruit of the *bel* (wood-apple) tree which are specially sacred to Shiva, grain to feed the sacred fish, flowers according to season, and last but not least plenty of small change. The *panda* also charges a fee for his services; there is no fixed rate — many, alas, extort all they can.

First comes the Onkareshwar temple, high up on the island. At the bottom of the last flight of steps leading to the main entrance is a bull, the vehicle of the god Shiva,

fashioned from beautiful green stone. The chief place of honour however is given to a bull of fine white marble which was presented by Maharani Ahalya Bai. The *lingam* is not visible from the doorway, as is usual, but is in a chamber on one side of the main hall. It stands in the centre of a small tank of water, which is said to maintain mysteriously an always constant level, though it is fifty feet or more above the river. The temple orchestra, and the great brass gong which worshippers strike as they enter, are maintained by trust funds provided by Maharani Ahalya Bai, but three princes share responsibility for daily worship: the Rao Sahib of Mandhata, the Holkar ruler of Indore and the Scindia ruler of Gwalior.

Monday is specially sacred to Shiva, and towards sunset on that day the temple orchestra leads a procession to the river side; the "five-headed *mukut*" is carried on to a ferry boat and paraded round the pool till dark, halting for offering at the bathing ghats. If the new moon falls on Monday the day is doubly sacred; there is a large *mela*, attended by thousands of people.

At the back of this temple is a special shrine facing east from the outside wall. Women who have been so unfortunate as not to bear a son come here to pray for one. I happened to be there once when a little procession of women arrived. The childless wife, her sari pulled well over her face, tied some coloured cotton thread round the figure in the shrine, and made on the wall the mark of a reversed swastika in cowdung paste. Sometimes the women may make instead the print of a hand in red paint, the fingers pointing downwards. If the prayers are granted, a "correct" swastika is made in thanksgiving, or a handprint with fingers pointing upwards. It was surprising to see how many records there were of this happy ending.

On the second day the pilgrim's duty is to make the circuit of the island. The path lies at first close to the water's edge and goes past Kedareshwar temple to the western point which is regarded as the "real" confluence of the Kaveri with



the Narmada. This small tributary enters the river from the south, half a mile above the island, but, so it is said, the waters do not mingle there — the Kaveri stream crosses over and flows down the smaller channel on the north side of Mandhata, joining the Narmada at its lower, western tip, where the bed is wide and the water very shallow. Coconuts offered to the Kaveri at the upper confluence are said to follow Kaveri's route on the north side of the island, while those offered to Narmada Mai at the same place follow the main stream through the deep pool on the south.

Turning east, the path climbs by a gentle slope, through a tangle of custard-apple trees, to two temples on the top of the island. The first of these is Gouri Somnath, also popularly known as "Uncle-and-Nephew". It is a three-storey building and there is a magnificent view from the top; the lamp that once burned at Mandugarh, nearly fifty miles away, was said to be visible from there. On the ground floor there is an enormous *lingam* of black marble, so large that two ordinary men cannot join hands round it. This feat however can be accomplished if the two individuals are "truly" uncle and nephew — though I have not been able to discover why this should be so.

Somnath means Lord of the Moon, one of the titles of Shiva. The story goes that this *lingam* was once of pure white marble, and that a man who gazed on its polished surface would see not his natural reflection, but the image of what he would be in his next incarnation. When the Muslims ruled in this part of India they destroyed and defaced many temples in their iconoclastic zeal. The Muslim general who ravaged Mandhata had heard of the *lingam*'s power and decided to test it. To his horror he saw in the shining pillar the image of that quadruped whose name a good Muslim will not even take on his lips. Furious at the insult, he had the *lingam* thrown into a furnace; it was not destroyed, but became the shining black pillar of today.

On my first visit to this temple I was puzzled to find the word *Kamaql* (which may be translated "nit-wit") neatly

carved on the top step leading to the shrine. The next year I found that the marks had been erased, and the Bhil attendant denied that anything had ever been carved there. "I know it was there," I replied. "I saw it last year, and there are still traces of it." Later I discovered the same word carved on the bathing ghat. My friend — the librarian — explained it. There had been an Indian soldier, he said, who was orderly to one of the officers. He was not very bright, and the officer, exasperated by his stupidity, would rudely address him as *Kamaql*\*. The orderly was unfamiliar with the word, which is Urdu in origin, and he was so proud of his new name that he recorded it wherever he went.

It is possible to reach Gauri Somnath by a steep flight of 247 steps directly up the almost perpendicular hillside instead of by the gentle more circuitous route through the trees. The steps are solid blocks of stone, some of them eighteen inches or more in height. Near the top is an archway, and seen across the river from my octagonal tower it framed a patch of sky that seemed no bigger than a fingernail. One evening I happened to look up; there in that tiny frame was a peacock, its tail fully spread in dance, its every movement clearly visible.

On the crest of the island just beyond Gauri Somnath are the remains of what was once the greatest temple of all. It is still used for daily worship, though there is no resident priest, and its original great tower has been replaced by a flat roof. It stands on a high plinth with what was once a magnificent frieze of stone elephants, but every one of them has been defaced, and the pillars of the porticos thrown down.

The highest portion of the island was originally fortified, and some of the gateways with their sculptured door-keepers are still standing. The circuit path passes through these ancient gateways to the top of the tremendous cliff overlooking the river to the east. On the very edge of this cliff stand the last three pillars of one of the most ancient temples

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\* The correct form is *Kham-aql*.



on the island. At the foot of the cliff, but out of sight from the top, a smooth flat rock stands waist high in the river bed. This is Bir Khila, Hero's Rock, and this is the spot where liberty to worship Shiva on the island was bought at the price of human sacrifice. The victim went willingly, even eagerly, to his doom, buoyed up with the promise that he would be re-born as a prince of royal blood. A great crowd of people watched him climb the hill, drugged and ecstatic, take a run from behind the temple and with a flying leap come hurtling through the air to be killed instantly on the flat rock of sacrifice. The last time this happened was in 1828, before the British Government had taken over that part of India and made human sacrifice illegal. A British officer watched the scene from a boat and recorded it in his diary; he had tried to persuade the victim to give up his purpose, but had failed.

On the third day the pilgrim visits the Amareshwar temple on the south bank of the river. Here had stood one of the historic *Jyotirlinga* temples, but there came a time when the whole south bank reverted to jungle, the site of the temple was forgotten, and the *lingam* lost among the ruins. At the end of the eighteenth century one of the Peshwas had built the Amareshwar temple in its place. Some time later the lost *lingam* was re-discovered, more or less by accident; the Benares pandits recognised it as genuine, and Daulat Singh, Rajah of Mandhata, built a temple for it, now known as the Viswanath temple.

Here I discovered the *lingacharan* ceremony, the worship of earthen *lingams*. Eleven Brahmins are appointed for this service, and paid from a trust fund instituted by Maharani Ahalya Bai and administered by the Holkar Maharajah of Indore. The appointment is limited to four months, so that as many Brahmins as possible may share the benefit, which includes a share of the sacred food cooked daily at the temple.

The ceremony begins soon after dawn. Each Brahmin takes his seat on a low wooden stool; before him is a lump of clay, about twice the size of a football, which has been

kneaded by the boy attendant till it is soft like plasticine. He has also a heavy wooden board, about three feet long and two feet wide, in which are thirteen hundred and twenty five depressions like a solitaire board. He sprinkles rice over this until there is one grain in every depression. Then he breaks off a piece of clay, rolls it into a long sausage, and from this makes a series of elongated marbles, each of which he presses into a depression so that the grain of rice adheres to it. He then reverses the marble so that it stands with the grain of rice uppermost, a tiny lingam ready for worship. It takes at least half an hour to fill the whole board, and worship cannot proceed until all the boards are ready. Some of the older men are slower than the younger ones, who get up and stretch their legs as they wait. When all are ready, the *lingams* are sprinkled with holy water and coloured powder, a lump of camphor is lit in the middle of each board, while verses from the Vedas are chanted antiphonally. After this the Brahmins disperse, the attendants collect all the *lingams*, now dry, into a heap, and throw them into the river where shoals of sacred fish scramble for the grains of rice which form their daily breakfast. In this way 15,900 *lingams* a day, 5,803, 500 a year, and 870, 525,000 during the one hundred and fifty years since the trust was constituted, have been made and thrown into the river.

The largest building on the southern bank is an ashram of Nirbani sadhus, who have renounced the world so completely that they do not consider it necessary to wear clothes. But except on special occasions they use ordinary saffron coloured robes in public, and do not go about dressed only in ashes and a necklace of *rudraksha* berries. I usually found the ashram empty except for a caretaker, but during one of my visits a group of about fifty sadhus from the main monastery at Allahabad was spending the *Chaturmasya* there. They had brought two elephants, and the feeding of the elephants became one of the sights of Onkarji. The sadhus exercised the privilege of their sect when they went to bathe at the *ghat* below their ashram, and neither they nor the women who drew water for their homes at the same *ghat*



appeared to feel any embarrassment because of their lack of clothing.

Adjoining another bathing *ghat* on this bank is an almost dry water course, where an underground trickle of water emerges from a brass cow's head and falls by way of a small *lingam* into the Narmada. This small stream is called Kapildhara, because the sage Kapil is said to have meditated here for a hundred years, and the confluence, called Gao Mukh, is holy. The stream comes from a spring in the jungle about a mile away, which has been enclosed in a *baori*, a stone-lined well. The water is about five feet deep, and is reached by a flight of steps. The story is that when Shiva with his trident had destroyed the demon Brahm Rakshas, the supreme God Brahma decreed that the trident must be cleansed on Vaidurya mountain south of the Narmada. Shiva struck his trident into the ground, and as he withdrew it a stream of water gushed out. The place is therefore called *Trisul-bhed*, the Trident Cleft. Here childless couples bind themselves together in one cloth and bathe in the pool in prayer for a son. The walls are plastered with swastikas; many petitions have been made since the monsoon rains obliterated those of last year.

□ □

*A carpenter pilgrim*



*The Vedic school  
and its students*



## Onkarji: Making Friends

**O**n my first holiday at Onkarji, having settled into my room in the octagonal tower, I soon established a routine. Each evening before sunset I would lock up, take the riverside footpath to Mōr Ghat for my last bathe of the day, and then climb to the temple above for a chat with Swami Nandgiri before going to bed. Next morning early I would bathe and return to the *dharmashala* for morning tea. I quickly discovered that the only milk available came from one buffalo kept by an old lady, so that the quality varied with the number of her customers, Mother Narmada being called on to make up the amount needed. On later visits I brought dried milk with me, so that I could control the proportion of holy water according to my own taste.

As I sat at the windows of my watch tower there was never a dull moment. There was an uninterrupted view eastward, straight up the river, and on Wednesdays, bazaar days, I could watch a fleet of ferry boats, their square sails set to catch the wind, going upstream towards the first rapid near Hero's Rock. They were full of gaily-dressed women, going home to their respective villages after making their weekly purchases in the bazaar.

The population of the *dharmashala* itself varied dramatically. One of my windows overlooked the spacious

platform in front of it, from which it seemed almost possible to dive straight into the pool, seventy feet or more below. I would sometimes go off to Markandeshwar in the evening, leaving the platform quiet and empty, and return in the morning to find a noisy excited band of pilgrims, who had thronged in by the night trains and early buses, filled every room, and spread their mats on the platform in the open air.

There was also a large population of grey monkeys, the long-tailed langurs, and I had to be very careful not to leave anything about that could possibly appeal to monkey mentality or monkey appetite. One afternoon I woke from my midday nap to find I was not alone; a large mother-monkey was seated on a windowsill, a half-grown baby clinging to her breast as she thoughtfully scratched her ribs in the way that monkeys do. A tiny pair of black hands, followed by a little black head, appeared at another window. Next, without the slightest warning, the grandfather of the tribe bounded on to the table, trod on a tin plate and sent it clattering to the floor, and bounded out again. The whole tribe would have followed, but by now I was thoroughly awake. I leaped up, seized my fly-flapper, and repulsed the invading army.

Every morning as I returned from Mōr Ghat to the *dharmashala*, I passed a workshop where the carpenter was already at work. He was a specialist, who devoted his life to supplying the whole countryside with rolling pins. He had a home made lathe, which could not have cost him more than one rupee; he had the Indian carpenter's multi-purpose adze, a chisel or two, and a flat stone on which to sharpen his tools. Power for the lathe was supplied by a piece of rope twisted round a pulley and operated by his ten year old son.

At the corner where the riverside footpath joins the main street there was a silversmith, Sonaji, who always greeted me as I passed. One morning he gave me a shock by calling out "I am going to have a fight with you." "Oh indeed?" I said, feeling rather anxious. "What have I done now?" To my relief I found it was a simple matter. He had seen Phulchand



bringing my milk in an enamel mug, and had set his heart on the mug. "It's just what I need," he said, "to keep the acid I use for soldering, and in war-time there are none to be had, not even in Khandwa city. So you will have to give me yours when you go away." "I should be delighted," I said. "If I had six mugs I would give you the lot." I noticed on a later visit that he didn't look well, and he told me he was suffering from piles. "In that case I can tell you what to do," I said. "The doctor in the Friends Hospital at Itarsi has cured many people of piles. Go to him, he will give you a needle, you will be all right in no time." But poor Sonaji was feeling too old and ill to face a rather troublesome railway journey; he never took my advice, though he gratefully accepted my mug.

Onkarji Post Office was located in the village Primary School, and the postmaster was also the teacher. Mailbags were brought from Mortakka railway station by the early morning bus. The only newspapers were those that came by post to the Rajah and one other subscriber. In order to learn the news I had to go to the school before the mail arrived, which was usually about nine o'clock. During the hot weather school began at seven; I would find about thirty boys and five or six girls seated on the ground on frayed strips of matting. The headmaster, who had no assistant, politely gave me his one chair and continued to keep his four classes busy until the mailbags arrived. Then the children were left to their own resources while their teacher attended to his postal duties. First of all he hunted for the Rajah's newspaper and tossed it over to me. I was allowed to open and read it while the letters were being sorted; then I did my best to fold it back into its wrapper and try (vainly) to make it appear that it had not been tampered with. In 1944 this was how I heard about D Day, and learned that the re-conquest of Europe had begun.

Early one morning, as I watched the town and bathing ghats come to life, I heard loud shouting, and realised after a time that it was largely composed of the kind of language not included in the standard Hindi text books. Presently the

school master appeared, accompanied by about twenty men, some of whom were carrying ropes. He told me that the man who was shouting was his younger brother, who was subject to such fits of mental disturbance. This attack was worse than usual, and they feared that he might do himself or others some injury, so they proposed to tie him to a tree outside the town till he recovered. I could not believe that this would be the best treatment for insanity, and persuaded them to wait a little longer before taking such drastic action. A few hours later I went to the school to see if any letters had come for me. There was the young man quietly seated; I talked to him and he appeared perfectly normal.

A number of people visited me in the *dharmashala*. One of them was a local boy, Gulab Rai, who attended the High School at Khandwa and was home on vacation. He was feeling like the proverbial "frog in the well", and longed to know more of the outside world. Sometimes he brought his small sister who was one of the few girls in the primary school. One day the little girl found some unusual pieces of stiff shiny paper lying in the gutter, picked them up and showed them to her brother. The boy recognised my name written on them and brought them to me. They were war-time airmail letters which the postman had carelessly dropped; as they were from my wife in England I felt particularly grateful, and particularly sorry to hear of the girl's sudden death only two years later.

Besides the Primary School Onkarji had also a small Vidyalyaya where fifteen or twenty Brahmin boys were being prepared for the priesthood. I often dropped in there, and was invited to sit with the teacher on the upper balcony where he provided me with a mat, and a bolster to lean on, and told his wife to prepare tea. As we talked he kept an eye on the boys studying in the room behind. The tea was brought by one of the younger boys, always the same one. When I had finished I put my cup and saucer on the floor, the boy poured water over them from a *lota*, and then I looked over the balcony railing and when the coast was clear I threw the water over



into the street. The cup was thus ceremonially cleansed so that the boy could take it into the house.

Here too I started an annual mango feast. I provided the mangoes, Shastriji the teacher provided the *puris*. My share of the good things was brought to me on the balcony, while Shastriji and the students, and his own children, had theirs in the study room, and Shastriji's wife had hers afterwards in the kitchen. The washing up was done, as with my tea-cup, over the railing of the balcony.

Another of the younger boys, about the same age as my "waiter", was named Mangi Lal. The pair had been given the job of bringing the household's water from the river, carrying it in a large pail on a pole over their shoulders. But the day came when I missed Mangi Lal's attractive face at the Vidyalaya, and learned that in spite of his charm he had been the naughty boy of the school, and had made so little progress in his study of the *Vedas* that he had been sent away. It was not long before I saw him again. Soon after he was expelled the time came for new appointments of Brahmins for the *lingacharan*. As the remuneration is very small there was no great competition for the job, and Mangi Lal had been chosen, along with two other boys from the Vidyalaya who wanted to earn something towards their fees. The morning that I was present a wealthy worshipper had distributed some fine grafted mangoes among the eleven Brahmins. Mangi Lal and his old school fellows had hurried to finish their quota of clay *lingams*, and then retired with the junior attendant, a boy of about the same age, to the back of the temple. There I found them squeezing their mangoes into their cupped hands and lapping up the juice with the greatest relish. As I came round the corner their faces broadened into sticky smiles of welcome. Mangi Lal generously offered me a handful of mango juice, but I succeeded in declining it without hurting his feelings.

Onkarji had a police station with two constables; I rarely met them, as they lived at the other side of the town. Police constables in India are not usually regarded with affection,

and I was pleasantly surprised when one of them, who had been bathing at the ghat, saw me coming down with my empty pail, and insisted on filling it for me and carrying it up all the hundred steps to my room in the *dharmashala*. I was reminded how little one can judge by externals. One might meet an ascetic with matted hair, dressed in little more than ashes, and find him to be a Master of Arts of an Indian or foreign university. A man in a ragged shirt, buying *puris* at your elbow, may turn out to be a wealthy money-lender.

One day a bald-headed little man, in a shabby and rather dirty shirt and dhoti, spoke to me in English and suggested that I might treat him to a meal. I was not surprised or annoyed, and in the end I provided food for several days, but his demands were not exorbitant and the bill was very small. He would visit me frequently, sit cross legged on my camp chair, and make himself at home. He had once been a kind of private secretary to the Shankaracharya (High Priest) of Sringeri Math in South India, who was one of the four most powerful dignitaries of orthodox Hinduism. He was now retired, and appeared to possess nothing beyond the clothes he stood up in, and the confidence he derived simply from being a Brahmin. Like many orthodox Hindus, he strongly disapproved of Mahatma Gandhi's campaign to abolish untouchability, and his demand that "out-castes" should be allowed to enter temples. He was preparing a lengthy petition to Maharajah Holkar of Indore for the protection of orthodox Hinduism. When he saw my typewriter he pressed me into service to type this document, which set out the Maharajah's duty in forcible language and fluent idiomatic English.

My guest also claimed to have second sight and psychic powers by which he could cure me of my lameness, about which he was concerned. I agreed to let him treat my hip, and he asked for some *ghee*, which I brought to him in a brass *lota*. He curled himself up on my chair, took a match stick, and stirred the *ghee* for several minutes as if writing something in it. Then he told me to take two teaspoonfuls each morning and evening. A day or two later he let me into



the secret. The "writing" in the *ghee* was the outline of a five-pointed star made in one continuous stroke, over and over again. This, he said, imparted magical healing qualities capable of combating diseases much worse than mine. I obediently followed his instructions so long as the *ghee* lasted, but failed to notice any benefit from the treatment. As for the five-pointed star, I have been unable to learn its significance. Is there any connection with the five-pointed "Star of Bethlehem"? or that which appears on the aircraft of the U.S. Air Force?

I myself was sometimes asked for medicine, by pilgrims and others, and did my best with my small stock of simple remedies. There was a government dispensary on the edge of the town, but during most of the time I spent in Onkarji the doctor's house was empty. On my last visit, however, there was a doctor, a newly qualified young man who had recently been appointed. When he discovered that I was finding it difficult to boil and cool enough drinking water, he invited me to come and fill up my water flask as often as I wished from the earthen jars maintained by his own cook. This young doctor was really keen on his work, and cared for his patients in a true spirit of humble service.

On this last visit I also heard of a special ceremony at the temple of Vishnu on the south bank, whose priest Swami Nand Lal Puri was a great friend of Swami Nandgiri. The occasion was the installation of a new Mahant of the Nirbani sect whose ashram was close by; under an awning in the temple courtyard sat an imposing row of venerable sadhus from Allahabad and elsewhere, and opposite them the new Mahant and various distinguished visitors, with big brass trays for offerings before them. One of the sadhus was very handsome, tall and slim with a long gray beard, and there was another dear old man, not so handsome but very attractive. I longed for a photograph but could not get near in the crowd till a young sadhu, also carrying a camera, cleared a space for us both. He knew little of photography, however, and I found myself warmly welcomed as official photographer, given a

generous share of the feast which followed and enough sweetmeats, wrapped in a clean cloth, to last me for many days. Fortunately the photographs were successful! There I met also a friendly Bengali sadhu who asked to see my palm, not for gain but because it was his hobby. He began talking in an undertone, "Oh, I see, long life", then with a chuckle, "but he'll never be rich". Finally, making spiral movements with his hand, "always thinking, thinking, thinking."

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## Dhayuri Kund

**I**t is possible to reach Dhayuri Kund from Bir railway station by bullock cart, a rough and dusty twenty mile journey. But it is far and away more interesting and enjoyable to make friends with the Dhimars at Onkarji and engage one of their flat-bottomed fishing boats to take one there, fourteen miles upstream. There are rapids to be negotiated, which have their difficulties and dangers, so two Dhimars are needed.

Dhayuri Kund is one of the most beautiful spots on a river famous for its beauty. The Narmada falls over a ridge of rocks over thirty feet high, in the second highest waterfall in its 850 mile course. There are six or eight main channels, and at the foot of the largest fall there is a deep and dangerous whirlpool. Ordinary swimmers would be drawn under and drowned, but there are Dhimars who can dive into the seething water and remain below for an amazingly long time. They are searching for those stones which, continually ground and pounded by the power of the water, take on the shape of the sacred *lingam*.

Though Swami Nandgiri had lived near Onkarji for several years, he had never visited Dhayuri Kund, and he willingly accepted the invitation to join me on the expedition. My Dhimar servant Phulchand welcomed the

idea; he was not very skilled, but he knew enough to be able to act as assistant provided a really good Dhimar was in command. I was able to get the ideal man, a little sun-dried fisherman of great wisdom and experience, Mukand Mankar, who knew every rapid by heart. "Mankar" is the title bestowed by the Rajah, the Rao Sahib of Onkarji, on headmen of the Dhimar caste. Mukand had one amusing little trait: When he raised his face to the wind and snuffed the air he would twitch his nose like a rabbit. It was as though he were possessed of a sixth sense unshared by ordinary mortals, able to catch the scent of what lay ahead.

Before we set out Swami Nandgiri gave me a solemn warning. "I hold you responsible for my safety," he said. "I am unable to swim; if the boat is wrecked, you will have to save me as well as yourself." His fear of shipwreck was quite natural. These locally made boats are not strong, their planks do not overlap; the boatman keeps a supply of clippings of cloth, bought cheaply from the village tailor, and in odd moments of leisure he stuffs some of them into the cracks wherever he notices a small leak. Even so the boat is never completely dry, and now and then baling is needed; if it were to get out of control and dash against a rock in the rapids it would go to pieces at once. During the previous rainy season a ferry boat had been wrecked, though it was much larger and stronger than our fishing boat. The current of the flooded river had caught it unexpectedly, and swirled it downstream to the rapids, where it broke up on a rock. Only one or two of its forty passengers had managed to swim to shore. Our own boat, even by fishing boat standards, was not of the best; our luggage was already on board and we were ready to start when I was informed that "the powers that be" had refused the permit to ply for hire. In great anxiety I hurried to the house of the local official, who was just about to mount his bicycle for a few days of village touring, and he very kindly issued the permit as a special favour.

During the hot weather and the rainy season the fishermen, by hoisting a sail, can use the prevailing westerly wind to travel upstream against the current, while travelling



downstream the current helps them against the wind. The trouble is that there are times when the wind drops, and those times always seem to come just when one is relying on it to blow. The wind may even turn round and blow in the opposite direction on the very day one has chosen to start.

Our permit secured, we started at dusk, as the temple bells were sounding for the evening *arti*. There was a slight wind, so we hoisted our dirty white sail, its rents roughly mended with patches of various colours, and were wafted gently along to the first rapid above the town. Here the current was stronger than the wind, and the boatmen had to work hard to keep us head on. Sometimes the boat became almost stationary, and then Phulchand would tuck up his *dhoti*, step over the side on to a half-submerged rock, drag the boat past some particularly bad spot, and then jump back in. Sometimes the rocks were so slippery that he lost his footing and was plunged waist deep into the water, and only desperate measures by the Mankar, who was sitting in the stern, saved the boat from getting out of control. Both men had to exert every ounce of strength; inch by inch we crept forward, and at last emerged into the quieter water above the rapid.

A mile further on were some melon beds, and we took on melons to save drinking water. With a normal wind we should have travelled the stretch of quiet, deep water to the next rapid in less than half an hour, but to our great disappointment the wind died away altogether, and the men had to paddle the whole distance, which took at least a couple of hours. In this rapid too we had some narrow escapes; once Phulchand went up to his neck in a hole and the boat turned broadside on. But somehow Mankar hung on; they regained control, and the boat moved slowly forward again. Above the rapid it was very quiet, the only sound that of the slight splashing of the paddles. From the forest which clothes the banks came the occasional sharp challenging bark of a *sambhar* deer, and then the unearthly scream of a jackal, which was echoed and re-echoed by the howls of every pack within ear-shot. There were trees whose branches swept the

water; white patches seen in the moonlight against their dark foliage turned out to be egrets roosting, which as we drew near flew off to seek some safer perch. But they flew just ahead of the boat and settled in the nearest tree, to be disturbed again as we drew level. This went on for a long distance, till at last they had the sense to swerve to the side and settle behind the boat.

By midnight there was still no wind, so we ran the boat ashore and slept, hoping for a breeze in the morning. We were off again soon after daylight with the sail hoisted, and at last a fresh breeze did spring up. Immediately the sail filled, and there was a cheerful rippling sound as the boat gathered speed. But the wind was fitful, and it was frequently necessary to use the paddles.

Near Dhayuri Kund steep rocks rise sheer from the water's edge, those on the southern side to a height of fifty feet or more, like the wall of a mighty fort. The river is narrow, the water deep and still. Here enormous old crocodiles lie just submerged, waiting hopefully for a funeral, for the villagers near dispose of their dead in this deep channel. The forest on the northern bank is called *Sitaban*, for Rama, Sita and Lakshman are said to have spent part of their exile wandering here. Weather-worn rocks have taken fantastic shapes; one of them, towering many feet above the trees, is known locally as Bankre Baba, because of its resemblance to a Maratha Brahmin wearing a *pagri*.

All this neighbourhood is holy ground, for many sages and ascetics have spent long periods here in meditation. One story is of a Brahmin named Rambhau Dube, who lived at Ratanpur village near the Kund, and who had been dumb from birth. Very early one morning, after bathing in the river, he was returning home through the forest by a very narrow pathway, wide enough for one person only. Presently he saw a Mahatma approaching. The Mahatma called out: "Who comes this way so early in the morning? Please make way." Rambhau, who had never before spoken, at once replied: "Maharaj, I am only a poor Brahmin." From that moment he



was able to speak normally, but though diligent search was made, no trace was ever found of the Mahatma.

There is no *dharmashala* near Dhayuri Kund; we camped by the water's edge on a convenient strip of sand, where we could bathe, cook, eat and wash the dishes in comfort. During the heat of the day Swamiji wisely sought the shade of some overhanging rocks, but I chose to climb up by the side of the fall to explore. I was attracted by a small temple just above flood level. It was a room about six feet square with a *lingam* in the centre and a steeply sloping tower above it. As I came up to the doorway I heard a voice. No one was in sight, and I could not at first make out where it came from. Then I noticed an opening in the side of the tower, and a rickety bamboo ladder leading up to it. A head appeared in the opening, and apparently approved of what it saw, for the body of a sadhu followed it. He descended to earth and we had a long talk, sitting close together in a tiny patch of shade, for the sun was right overhead. He had a good sense of humour and we got on very well. The next year when I called again the upper chamber was empty; there was no sound but the whistling of the hot wind in the dry acacia trees.

On my way back to our camp, I missed the route by which I had climbed the perpendicular rocks, and I could find no way to get down, though the camp was just below me. I had rashly gone out barefoot, and now I hopped from one foot to the other on the scorching stone. In the end I let myself down by my hands, regardless of the burning pain, and spent most of the rest of the day up to my chin in water.

At Dhayuri Kund we found some of our Dhimar acquaintances, who had come there to earn part of their living. Cartloads of bamboos are brought there from the forests north of the river and deposited near the bank, bound together in bundles with strips of bark. The Dhimars tie the bundles together to form rafts, and float them downstream for twenty miles or more to Kherighat below Onkarji, where the Khandwa-Indore railway crosses the river. A party of Dhimars take charge of a dozen rafts. On the stretches of

quiet water they tie them together into a long train, and tow or pole them down to the next rapid. Here they are separated, and one of the Dhimars shoots the rapid on one raft, a dangerous and exciting operation. When he reaches the quiet water at the foot he leaves the raft against the bank and goes back for another. Then the whole train is linked up again and the process repeated over the next stretch of calm water and the next rapid.

I would have liked to spend a second night at Dhayuri Kund, but Swami Nandgiri thought otherwise. He had procured a "Shankarji" from the sacred pool, and he began to feel anxious about the little birds waiting for crumbs and the plants that needed water. So we started back when the heat of the sun had abated, and paddled steadily all through the evening and long after dark. About nine o'clock we landed, had supper and slept. We were off again by three next morning, and shot the second rapid by moonlight. It was a broad straight channel, fairly free from rocks, and more exhilarating than alarming. As the day dawned we could see wild animals come down to the water to drink, looking carefully in every direction as they came to make sure there was no danger. Later we passed numbers of village pilgrims, all in their best and brightest clothes, on their way to a *mela* which was taking place that day at one of the temples.

The sun was up when we reached the last rapid. Phulchand skilfully guided the boat down it, fending it off the rocks with his long bamboo. As we came alongside the bathing ghat below the *dharmashala*, the palace gong on Mandhata struck seven.

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*Dhayuri Kund*



*Boat journey: a halt for a meal*





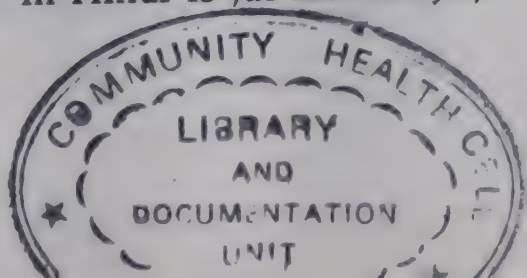
# Dhimars

One of the free entertainments which I enjoyed from my watch-tower was the performance of the men of the Dhimar caste in the portion of the main pool where the occupants of the ferry boats threw coins into the water as offerings to Mother Narmada. At one moment the pool would be tranquil from bank to bank, then suddenly a dozen heads would break surface, gasping and calling on Shiva. The sound reverberated through the gorge, re-echoing from cliff to cliff. They remained there for a few moments, took in another huge gulp of air and disappeared again in unison. They could stay submerged for an almost incredible time. They put their finds into their cheeks; on festival days their cheeks are bulging, on other days they are not so successful. How much do they pick up? That is a secret, even from one another — and there are no income tax returns to declare.

The hunting ground of the women and children was among the rocks of the rapids towards Mōr Ghat. To reach the spot they had to cross the waist-deep racing water of the main channels. The women removed their outer layers of clothing, bundled them up, and balancing the bundles on their heads waded and swam to their hunting ground in the costume of a western beauty queen. As I said earlier they could all swim like otters ('otter' in Hindi is *jal-manushya*,

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'water-man'), and they spend as much time in the water as out of it.

On several days when I went to bathe at Mōr Ghat I found Dhimars at my end of the pool. Their boat was anchored to a large stone in about twelve feet of water, and as I swam on the surface I could hear the noise of rocks being banged and turned over below me. I could not dive so deep, so I descended by the anchor rope to investigate, but I had to come up for air too quickly to search for money. I liked these underwater disturbances, as I then felt safe from the crocodiles. One day a little earlier I had been practising swimming under water, and just as I came up for breath a large crocodile did the same about twelve yards away. I was rather a long way from the bank, and the calm impersonal look in his eye did not appeal to me. I turned and fled, and was thankful to reach my rock ledge in safety.

When the coin-fishermen left the Mōr Ghat pool in the evening, they would anchor the branch of a tree to an underwater rock, so that the leaves waved just above the surface; this, they explained, was a "scare-crocodile", and would keep those unwelcome visitors away. It was comforting to find such a branch in position when I went to bathe; I regarded it as my "barrage balloon", protecting me against crocodile raids.

The Dhimars had another trick which was probably even more efficacious. They struck the surface of the water with cupped hands, making a loud drumming note which resounded up the gorge. The vibrations must have been felt for long distances under water, warning crocodiles to keep off. I longed to learn the art, and some of the men gave me private tuition, but I could never achieve more than the poorest imitation; it would not have deceived the most simple-minded crocodile.

During the cold weather and the hot season which follows, the Dhimars build temporary shelters and cultivate melon and cucumber beds by the water's edge. As the water



recedes they extend the beds until the lowest level is reached. The little huts give shelter from the cold winds of January and the hot sun of April and May, but when the crops have been gathered they are deserted, and when the rains begin in June they are swept away by the first flood.

The fishermen-gardeners set up hedges of thorns on the boundaries of their strips of sand, and mark out their enclosures in square or oblong beds. They bring loads of leaf mould and manure in great bags slung across the backs of buffaloes, and mix it with the sand. Then they sow their seeds, and presently the growing plants cover the sand-banks with a bright green garden. The gardens are holy ground where shoes must not be worn; they belong to Narmada Mai, and the Dhimars offer coconuts to gain her protection and ensure a good crop. Nevertheless misfortunes may happen; untimely rains in the hills may send the floods rushing down, healthy plants and swelling fruits are swept away, and the work of many weeks goes for nothing. The Dhimars accept such disasters as part of the game, and begin all over again, without too much grumbling, if there is any hope that a crop may still be raised before the onset of the monsoon.

It was from such a garden that Swami Nandgiri and I had purchased our melons on our way to Dhayuri Kund. Hoshangabad, in the middle of the Narmada valley, where I lived for a number of years, was a great centre of melon cultivation. The Madras-Delhi railway crosses the river there, and trucks loaded with melons are attached to every train going north, for the fruit merchants of Delhi, nearly five hundred miles away, buy up the crops in advance; it is a common complaint that only the inferior fruit is left for local consumption.

One year while I was at Hoshangabad the season was exceptionally good. There were no unwelcome floods and the melons ripened early. One of my Dhimar friends had grown the biggest melon I have ever seen. His garden was about half an acre in extent and that year he had taken Rs.400/- in cash, while his expenses had been about Rs.130/- (£10), and of

course he and his family had been able to eat melons till they could eat no more. He and his wife had a good laugh when I told them what my wife had heard on board the ship on which she had travelled from England. A doctor had been warning passengers who were new to India that they must *never* eat watermelons, because the growers pump water into them with syringes to make them grow big! If that doctor could have seen the monster melon he would have been even more convinced that he was right. It measured 3'7" round the waist, and four and a half feet round the longest circumference. There had been four others of about the same size, but this one had been kept specially for a kind of harvest thanksgiving on the auspicious night of the new moon.

The ceremony usually takes place at night, but my friends kindly agreed to have it before sunset so that I could take photographs. In a thatched hut on the edge of the garden a Brahmin had set up a small portable shrine. A square about two feet across had been marked out with white lines, and on it was a wooden board covered with a white cloth, holding a copper tray embossed with figures of Bal Mukund, the infant Krishna. The tray was covered with banana and mango leaves, and at one point it was taken out and dipped into a brass bowl of curds. Leaf plates held different kinds of grain and white and red powder; a cotton wick was burning in a saucer of oil. The old Brahmin, who looked poor and shabby, recited in a sing-song voice, and as he finished each section some one sounded a gong and blew on a conch shell. At one point he paused to tie coloured threads round the wrists of the worshippers. While he was reading, one of the Dhimars was squatting crosslegged and carving up the melon. He would cut a great slice and dig out all the black seeds, and one big basket was gradually filled with bright pink chunks of fruit. Before he had finished a second basket was more than half full.

Men, women and children came by, each one offering small coin which was waved around the Bal Mukund tra and then laid down before it. Some brought coconuts, an



these were broken by the water's edge, cut up and distributed as *prasad* along with the chunks of melon. Finally a lump of camphor was lit in a large shining brass dish and carried around, and all present passed their hands over the flame and then over their bodies, claiming the divine protection from harm.

Some of the fruit was kept for late-comers. The Brahmin took the cash — two or three rupees. The seeds of the melon were carefully set aside, to be sown the following season.

I got to know the Dhimars of Onkarji and Mandhata very intimately. Many of the men took me out in their boats when they went fishing. Among these was a young man named Kunnu who could throw the circular net — a skill not all possessed. First he flung a hollowed square of wood, which struck the surface with a resounding noise, thus attracting the fish. Then he cast the net over the same spot. It opened out in a great circle, weighted all round the circumference, and sank. Then with two or three slow movements he drew it in, enclosing (so he hoped) the fish. Once on twice the net caught on a rocky snag under water, and then Kunnu dived, several times if need be, to free it.

The Dhimars operate the Narmada ferry boats, which are not allowed to ply after dark; one had to be careful not to find oneself on the wrong side of the river after sunset. They charged one pice (about equal to an old English farthing) for each journey. For one rupee however one could get a season ticket, which not only entitled the holder to cross the river as often as he pleased for a whole year, but allowed his dependents to do the same. Possession of this ticket gave me the satisfying feeling that I was a citizen of Onkarji, with privileges denied to the mere visitor; sometimes the Dhimar ferry man would even make a special trip for me when I was the only person waiting to cross. Sometimes too if one or two of Mother Narmada's coconuts came bobbing along past the ferry boat the ferryman would alter course to retrieve them, for the Dhimars regard themselves as entitled to their share.

Each year some of them, like Mukand Mankar, took me for longer trips, up and down the many rapids between Dhayuri Kund and Maheshwar. A Dhimar stripped to the waist for action, guiding a boat or a raft down a rapid, makes a continuous moving picture of human strength and grace combined. I tried again and again to record it on my camera, but it needed a cinema film. Other Dhimars like Phulchand had served me for a whole holiday period, taking me to the temples, fetching food from the shops and water from the river. They sometimes cooked my food and washed my dishes, a service which even Brahmins allow them to perform. Before long I knew most of them by name, and had learned which of the women were Hariya Mankar's seven daughters and which men they had married. The children were too many for me and I never sorted them out, though I was sometimes asked for medicines if they were sick.

When I arrived at Onkarji from Maheshwar in 1944 I was distressed to find how many troubles had recently befallen my Dhimar friends. Phulchand, my first Dhimar helper in 1942, had never been bright; now, his marriage had ended in disaster. His wife had deserted him in favour of a rival, Phulchand had broken down completely and ended his days in the Nagpur Mental Hospital. Then, one of Hariya Mankar's sons-in-law, a fine young boatman, had died suddenly while away from home on his first visit to a city. Worst of all was the disaster of the night before I arrived: the line of little houses on Mandhata, where Hariya Mankar and all his clan had lived, had been completely gutted by fire. There had been a wedding marquee set up on an open space close by, an overturned lamp had set the tent ablaze, and the flames had jumped the gap to the thatched roofs of the fishermen's houses. They could do no more than save their own lives; everything they possessed, including the hoarded currency notes of Hariya Mankar's life's savings, had been destroyed.

The homeless families moved into some vacant houses on the other side of the town, and there on my last evening



came a final blow. A boy of about sixteen, clambering on the rocks, had fallen and injured his spine. They called me; nothing seemed broken, but I feared internal injury and advised them to take him to hospital. An hour later, as I walked to Mor Ghat for a final bathe, I saw four of the family swiftly paddling a boat downstream, the boy lying in the middle, bound for the little hospital at Barwaha. I waved to them as they entered the rapids and disappeared from sight.

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*Kaleshwar Fort and Bathing Ghat*



*Amarkantak: the pool above the spring*



# Maheshwar

I paid my first brief visit to Maheshwar in 1943, coming down from Onkarji on that memorable trip when the old sanyasi had, as it were, conferred on me "the freedom of the river". As we neared the town, on the final lap of our journey, our punt passed beneath the overhanging walls of an old fort-like building on a steep bluff. I learned that it was known as Kaleshwar, and that Queen Ahalya Bai had sometimes used it as a place of quiet retreat. I went exploring and found that it was a mixture of fort, palace and temple — a temple where worship still took place. Otherwise, it was deserted, and it attracted me very much.

During the following year I was living at Kharraghat, Hoshangabad. In the hostel there were a few orphan boys who had nowhere to go for the hot weather holiday, so I wrote to ask whether I might bring them and their 'house father' to stay at Kaleshwar for three weeks or so. The local official, the "Amin Sahib", replied with a warm welcome, and I decided to go myself a few days ahead of the boys to prepare the way. This time I took the train to Barwaha on the north side of the river, and the charcoal-driven bus for the two-hour journey downstream to Maheshwar. The stresses of the war years had not improved the service, and when we arrived it was too late to go to Kaleshwar that day. The

*dharmashala* in the town was clean and well-kept, and I and my young cook spent the night there, sleeping on the flat roof, with one of the bastions of the city wall towering high above us.

The next morning I sought out the Amin Sahib. His name was M.K. Shinde — which is another form of Scindia, the family name of the royal house of Gwalior. On his mother's side, he said, he was descended from Queen Ahalya Bai. He was very friendly, but thought that Kaleshwar might be too far from the bazaar to be convenient. This was true, and he arranged for me to be shown some alternatives. Meanwhile his servant, a *Bhoi* fisherman who remembered my previous visit, took me down to the ghats. The scene was very gay, for the women wear hues more varied than is usual in Hoshangabad, and the men, not to be outdone, wind brightly coloured *pagris* round their heads.

At the ghats I met another fisherman acquaintance, Shobha Ram. He welcomed me warmly, and I fixed up for him and his boat to be at our service for the season. He had a big boat which would be able to take our whole party, and the terms seemed ridiculously low. We began by going over to a low rocky island in the river where the temple of Baneshwar stands. There were Indian peewits and terns nesting on some of the rocks, and there were pools where it was possible to bathe, although in the deepest and most attractive one I had seen the superstructure of a large crocodile whose company I did not desire.

As I went back through the streets I saw an old gentleman, his white hair coiled up on the top of his head, seated on a quilt on the cool platform outside his house. When I greeted him he invited me to sit and talk, sharing his quilt and the bolster against which he leaned. His name was Awasthi, and he was a retired Veterinary Surgeon. He was a Brahmin, much respected and often consulted as a doctor; he became a good friend.

When I returned to the *dharmashala* I found to my astonishment that the old "Maharaj" who was caretaker was



standing upright on his head in the courtyard, with nothing between the hard stones and his matted hair, calmly reciting names of God: Shiva Shiva, Sati Sati, Sita Sita Ram. This continued for about five minutes, then he put down a leg and turned himself the right way up. He told me that he had practised *yoga* postures from his youth, though there were some of the eighty four which he did not know. The next day, when I settled up with him before leaving, he became confidential. "Why should I hide anything from you?" he said. "I get four rupees a month for caring for the *dharmashala*, and that keeps me in *ganjha*. I gave up charging guests, and I simply left it to them to give what they wished, nothing if they were poor. I have been here fourteen months and never lacked food, God has given me all I need." *Ganjha* is made of dried hemp flowers and is used like tobacco, but is intoxicating. Many *sadhus* regard its use as a way of worship — not a vice, but a virtue.

The alternatives to Kaleshwar had duly been put before me during the first day. Some were impossible, none were attractive, but it became clear to me during the process that there were some people who did not wish me to stay at Kaleshwar. It was sad to find how widespread was the conviction that no English man could live without meat or liquor; even Dr. Awasthi found it difficult to believe that I had never taken alcohol as a beverage. I told the Amin Sahib frankly that I would guarantee that no meat or liquor would be taken to Kaleshwar and that we would not enter the temple, but that our holiday would be spoiled if we could not use the building. He assured me with great friendliness that I need have no anxiety, and issued our written permit with no further delay.

Down we went to the river, loaded our possessions into our boat, and started off. The May sun was hot, and I opened my umbrella which I rarely used. On our way upstream however we had to pass the Ahalya Bai ghat, immediately below the main palace in the city. Here *chaprassis* were on duty, and they made it clear that an umbrella over an

ordinary mortal was considered disrespectful to the Queen's memory; I had to fold it until we were safely past. We beached the boat at the foot of the steep climb to Kaleshwar, and a boy of about ten, who was playing near by, helped us to carry up our luggage. His name was Mangtiya (meaning "beggar-lad", and given to divert the evil eye from an eldest son), and he soon became a special friend. He lived in a small village by the river between us and Maheshwar and his father was one of the palace *chaprassis*.

On the west side of Kaleshwar the cliff falls steeply to a nullah down which a tiny stream trickles into the Narmada. This trickle is the River Maheshwari,\* the confluence is sacred, and there is a bathing ghat, near which Mangtiya's father had a little melon bed. On the east side of the fort, upstream, is a second precipitous nullah, and inland to the north a stretch of very rough eroded country full of gullies. The fort stood on the flat top of the bluff; its stout walls formed a rectangle about sixty by fifty yards in extent, and in the shorter east and west walls were great gateways with heavily armoured double doors. Inside, the temple stood in the middle of the courtyard, facing east. Round the courtyard ran a colonnade, each corner enclosed to make a room, and on the south side a balcony jutted out three feet beyond the wall, giving a wonderful view up, down, and across the river. This had been the Queen's retreat, and had a polished black and white stone floor. Above the colonnade, and accessible by steps cut in the thickness of the wall, was a promenade defended by battlements, each of which was pierced by nine holes at shoulder height, from which a defender might shoot in different directions, while another hole at his feet showed

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\* The river Maheshwari rises in the Vindhya a little to the east of Mandugarh and flows due south towards Maheshwar. Just outside the city it turns sharply west and then again south into the Narmada. In very ancient times a moat was dug eastward and then south from the first bend, and part of the Maheshwari current diverted into it, so as to surround the city on all sides by water. In the course of centuries this eastern arm has been largely blocked by floods and erosion, so that it is now a mere "trickle".



him any threat from the bottom of the wall. On this promenade we slept and had our evening meal. The apertures for the sentries' arrows had all been taken over as desirable nesting sites by the local birds. I myself found a choice retreat in a verandah above the Queen's balcony; part of the roof had fallen in during an earthquake some years earlier, but there was enough left to give me shade for much of the day. The river here is half a mile wide; there are no hills or forests beyond, though there are jungly hillocks here and there.

Next evening the boys arrived, seven of them, walking from the bus stand along the riverside with their little bed rolls and small tin trunks. Their house-father, Harry Mirchulal, had been left behind at Barwaha railway station, wrestling with the heavy luggage which the bus would not take. He arrived the following morning, having travelled overnight in a bullockcart which he had driven himself for most of the way. At last we were all united; now, we thought, our holiday can begin.

The next day was a full moon, and a *mela*, and Shobha Ram did not appear. It soon became clear that he did not intend to appear at all; he found it more profitable to use his boat as a ferry for pilgrims. My Bhoi friend Mannu came to our help and offered me the services of his little brother Amar Singh, a boy of eleven with a broad smile which revealed a row of lovely white teeth. Amar Singh's boat was smaller than Shobha Ram's, but he knew how to handle it, and we arranged things to our mutual satisfaction. Some days the wind was so strong and the water so rough that we could not use the boat at all, but Amar Singh ran our errands in the bazaar and we found plenty of interest on land.

The temple priest did not talk with us much, but he was always polite, and after a few days we unexpectedly acquired a friend. An old sadhu turned up; he had a kindly face, he wore a crimson *pagri*, and he was very friendly. We had made the only habitable corner room into a store room, and he asked if he might share it. He would not disturb us, he said,

but he had stayed there once before to perform an *akhand jyoti*, keeping a lamp continuously burning for a considerable period, a month or more. He now wanted to repeat this, and we gladly let him settle in. His needs were very simple; he did no cooking, but accepted what visitors brought him, and shared it all with us. Many people came to seek his advice, and like the proverbial camel who asked to come into the tent out of the rain he gradually took over the whole room, though he never objected to the boys going in and out for their needs. We too had visitors; one was a Muslim shopkeeper who belonged originally to Hoshangabad. When he heard that we had come from there he brought a lovely gift of melons.

Soon after "our old Maharaj", as we called him, had come to live with us, we encountered two big stout men, one a sadhu, at the bathing ghat below. There was a little crowd around them, and as we appeared the second man began singing in a very powerful voice about the sin of cow-killing. The song was clearly intended for our instruction, and by and by they came up to the fort with some followers and held a singsong on the same theme on the promenade. This went on till dusk; then they left, shouting to our Maharaj to keep a sharp eye on us. But that was the end of "the opposition", after that we were left in peace.

One very hot day the Maharaj asked me to cut his hair — not all of it, but a kind of ventilation patch on the top of his head by which, he hoped, the hot air might escape. His hair was very thick and wiry, but I did my best, and he was very pleased with what I produced. However it proved insufficient, so he wound a piece of string tightly round his beard from the chin downwards, producing a kind of inverted palmtree that stuck straight out in front. This too was not enough; a second palmtree, a size larger, sprouted out of the top of his head. He made a striking silhouette as he sat in the balcony, and I got him to pose bolt upright on his leopard skin and lift his head so that both palm-trees were framed in the archway against the sky. The photograph is all that could be desired.



After a few days the wind dropped, the skies cleared, and the river had the added beauty of wonderful reflections in the water. That night after dark we stood on our promenade looking across to the opposite bank. Little Bachchu, our youngest, suddenly cried out "Look! There are two skies!" There they were. Above the long low line of the far bank shone the Southern Cross, below it the reflection of the Cross in the water, so bright and still that it was an exact replica of the original. We saw it on two nights, but not again.

We made two trips to *Sahasradhāra* (Thousand Falls) three miles down the river, the first time walking by the river-side path, the second in a big hired boat that could carry us all. There is another Sahasradhara far upstream in the Mandla District, and similar stories are told of both. A king (or a demon) had tried to block the course of the river; he had a thousand arms (or a thousand coats of mail). Nar Narayan had become incarnate, and by the power of his *tapasya* had hacked off one each year for a thousand years, until every little *dhāra* had been set free and danced over the great ridge of rock across the river.

On the day of our boat trip the wind was so strong that we could neither paddle nor punt, but had to be towed. The *chaprassi* on duty at the Ahalya Ghat refused to allow the boatman to tow across it, though it was obvious to everyone that nothing else was possible. The boatman argued, and the *chaprassi* grew very angry and laid his hand on his sword. Fortunately a higher official who was present intervened and readily gave permission. As we sailed past in the evening on our way home the *chaprassi* once more abused the boatmen, threatening to "get his own back". They decided to forestall him by going straight to the higher official themselves to report.

When we reached the falls the boatmen were very kind to me. They were determined that I should not miss anything because of my lameness, and helped me from rock to rock, while the boys jumped and scrambled to their hearts' delight. In one place there are about a dozen of the larger streams

within a hundred yards, divided from one another by narrow ridges of rock; they all fall into a channel at right angles to the stream above. The boatmen jumped one fall after another on the narrow rocks until one of them stood on a point overlooking the cauldron below. He called to me to watch, and did a somersault dive into the swirling pool. As he came to the surface he was carried swiftly downstream, but he knew exactly what he was doing, struck out for a piece of rock and drew himself out. When he had climbed up again the other boatman joined him, and they gave us an exciting exhibition. Then the boys and I found small pools where we could lie and let the cool water cascade over us. We travelled back with the sail; the strong morning wind had moderated and it was a pleasant leisurely journey.

In Maheshwar itself there was much to see. Behind the Ahalya Ghat and its vigilant *chaprassis* there was a temple when the Queen was worshipped as though she were a goddess; people raise their folded hands to their foreheads before her portrait and say *Achche rakhiyo, Ma* (Keep me safe, Mother). Here traditional Indian time was kept. Each day is divided into watches, each watch into periods of twenty four minutes. The period is measured by a perforated metal bowl floating in water, which gradually fills. Close by stands a frame like a child's counting frame, with a row of balls strung across it. When the metal bowl sinks, the period is complete; the watchman strikes a gong and pushes one ball along to the other side of the frame, while all the other clocks in the town follow the gong. Out at Kaleshwar we simply rose and went to bed by the sun; we used no artificial light, for by 1944 oil for lamps was very scarce. But when a man came to "our old Maharaj" to ask for a horoscope for his baby daughter, giving the exact time of her birth, I did wonder which "time" he was using. Certainly not B.B.C. time; there was not one receiving set in the town.

Behind the temple was the old palace, its durbar hall preserved just as it was when Ahalya Bai had held audience there. It was no wonder that she was so much revered, for she was one of the most remarkable rulers that India has ever



produced. "For more than thirty years", writes Sir John Malcolm,\* "her administration was the basis of the prosperity of the dynasty. Her principle appears to have been moderate assessment, and respect for the rights of village officers and owners of land. She sat every day in open durbar and heard every complaint in person, and although she often referred cases to courts of equity and arbitration, she was invariably patient in the investigation of the most insignificant cases when appeals were made to her decision. The hours free from affairs of state were given to acts of devotion and charity, and a deep sense of religion appears to have strengthened her mind in the performance of her worldly duties."

One of Ahalya Bai's acts of devotion was the institution of the *lingacharan* ceremony, not only at Onkarji but also at Maheshwar, where it was performed by eighty eight Brahmins instead of a mere eleven. Among them I found my friend Dr. Awasthi, who introduced me to several others. As we succeeded in overcoming their initial prejudice against "foreigners" who *always* drank wine and ate meat, they became very friendly. One of them told me that he had been educated at a Christian school and still remembered some of the Bible stories he learned there: for example, how Jesus had once attended a wedding feast and turned the wine into water so that the guests should not get drunk.

There were some fine memorial *chhatris* (pavilions), wonderful examples of the skill of the old stone masons. Each side of an octagon consisted of one huge slab of stone covered with elaborate geometrical designs. The memorial to Ahalya Bai's daughter Mukta Bai has a series of human figures round the base, some men, some women, some pairs in each other's arms. One shows a woman suckling her baby, a wonderful expression of pride and joy on her face. Another is of a soldier embracing a woman rather too intimately to be polite; the expression on *his* face says plainly: "I know I'm doing what I shouldn't, but I'm thoroughly enjoying myself

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\* *Memoirs of Central India* (1832)

all the same!" On Ahalya Bai's memorial is the most elaborate carving of all, a large panel with a snake design which consists of one snake only, woven in and out of its own coils.

The palace and temples and many of the houses at Maheshwar stand within the city walls, which sweep round in a great semicircle with the river as its diameter. People walk along the top of the walls from one part to another as they do at York in England, and as in York the walls are pierced by great gateways. The bazaar, and the houses of the poorer folk, are outside the walls and lower down.

I often walked into the town to visit the public library, which had one of the only two English newspapers available. I also visited the Post Office where the Postmaster was very friendly, and I got to know one of the magistrates, called the munsiff, who lived just opposite the library and took a warm interest in our doings. The fortress-palace of Mandugarh was only about twenty miles away. Today the monkeys trespass unhindered into its deserted rooms; at night the jackals venture into the royal pavilion — for now no princess watches there, looking across the valley to see the lamp lighted on the island at Dharmapuri. The *parikrama-bāsis* keep her memory alive, they will not fail to bathe in Rewa Kund, and I was eager to take the boys there to see it all. I asked the munsiff's advice about the journey, and he introduced me to a young police officer who knew the area well. The officer's account made it clear that in wartime conditions the trip was too difficult to be practicable, and to our great regret we had to give up the idea.

To make up for this disappointment the munsiff very kindly arranged a party for the boys, and invited some other friends also. He served some delicious snacks and then came cups of a pale greenish drink. When I inquired suspiciously if it were intoxicating, they all roared with laughter; it was made from green unripe mangoes and was most refreshing — I drank as much as I could!



These young officials impressed me very favourably. I once visited the Amin Sahib at his office. There was quite a crowd waiting outside, but when the *chaprassi* saw me he invited me in, and the Amin Sahib asked me to sit down while he went on with his work. He worked hard for an hour and a half, dealing with a stream of people, making notes of their answers to his questions. He listened carefully, taking trouble to get the facts of every case clear, and gave his mind fully to each one in turn. Then he leaned back and relaxed a little with me, and gave his attention just as fully to my own comparatively trivial business.

Our last morning dawned, and I went on a round of farewell visits; the munsiff and the postmaster both insisted on a final cup of tea, and I found the old Maharaj at the *dharmashala* having a smoke with some friends. I hunted up Shobha Ram and gave him a small present and a little good advice; if instead of disappearing he had come to me with his difficulties, I said, he would have had fair treatment. So we parted friends.

The boys cooked our evening meal at midday and then carried everything down to the big boat waiting at the *ghat* — for we were going back to Onkarji by river. Mannu and Amar Singh saw us off, we hoisted sail and watched Amar Singh's disconsolate little figure, left behind on the *ghat*, grow smaller until we could no longer see his brave smile. With a good wind we made the nineteen miles to Mardana before sunset. There was one exciting rapid to be climbed, where there was a great tussle between wind and current, but in the end we found our way up.

Next morning we made steady progress. There were several rapids where the boys thoroughly enjoyed themselves. They tumbled out of the boat to push and pull, and though their well-meant efforts were not always well-directed, the boatmen took it all in good part. We passed a village called Gangeshwar, on a little hill which must once have been a fort; it was possible to see how the defenders had protected their water supply. Near here is one of the biggest rapids of

all; over much of the width of the river there is a sheer drop of about two feet, but near each bank there is a kind of chute which allows boats to pass, though the current is very strong. With our big sail filled we rushed at the gap, but were quickly brought to a standstill. The boys leaped out, seized the towrope and pulled for all they were worth, my young cook encouraging them at the top of his voice. Measured by the expenditure of noise and energy this must have been the worst rapid of the whole journey, but at last we emerged and the wind carried us forward again.

For half a mile above the fall the river is swift and full of rocky islands; one of these near the middle has been built up into a platform, about three feet above hot-weather water level. On this spot, it is said, a holy man spent many years in meditation; his fame was such that sadhus from the Ganga came to visit him. But the visitors were unhappy; it seemed to them wrong that a sacred river should flow from east to west and not, like the Ganga, from west to east. Their host therefore exercised his occult powers on their behalf so that the portion of the Narmada by which they sat should flow from west to east. Certainly, the water that surrounds the sacred platform does *look* as though it were flowing in the opposite direction from the rest.

By midday we had reached a lonely little temple and a dilapidated pilgrim shelter at a place called *Gao Mukh*, the Cow's Mouth. There is no resident priest, but there were big shady tamarind trees over the ghat, and plenty of sticks for a fire. It was pleasant to sit in the shade and enjoy the birds while the boys cooked, and after we had eaten they set to work and cooked the evening meal also. This meant we were rather late in starting again, but at last we came in sight of the railway bridge. The current below it is swift and our progress was slow, and by the time we had reached the hilly forested country above the bridge the light was almost gone and there was no moon. But the boatmen pushed on, we surmounted the last bad rapid, and with the failing wind came gently into the deep still water and the familiar ghat



below "my" *dharmashala*. The old Brahmacharya Swami Narmadanand, who had been in charge of the *dharmashala* the previous year, told me that "my" rooms had been vacated that very morning and were swept and clean. For me, as always, it was a home-coming.

It was good, next day, to be greeted many times with "Why didn't you come earlier? We missed you!" I bought my season ticket on the ferry, calculating that as all the boys would be able to travel to and fro with me on the same ticket I shouldn't lose much. I spent a couple of days showing them all I could, and then they all went off back to Hoshangabad, and I had a few days more in which to enjoy old friends and the changing season.

The monsoon was approaching, thunderstorms growled in the hills; sometimes the clouds piled up to the north were so densely black that the island stood out dramatically against them. Then a gleam of evening sun would break through; on every tree the fresh green leaves of spring glittered against the blackness, and the whitewashed temple tower changed to golden marble. Fiery sunsets filled the whole sky as I sat once more with Swami Nandgiri, who one day gave me a very special feast.

War time shortages were worse than ever; the two English newspapers no longer reached Onkarji, and it was in some subscriber's Hindi newspaper that I read about D-Day in the school/post office. There were no longer any note-pads or even pencils for sale in Ram Pareshar Pande's little library-shop, and the old sadhu Narmadanandji, who was custodian of the *dharmashala*, was delighted when I gave him a few sheets of writing paper and a stub of pencil as a parting gift. The charcoal-burning bus, that contemptible piece of "mishanry", had become so extremely unpredictable that I engaged a bullock cart for the seven mile journey back to Mortakka railway station.

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*"Our Old Maharaj": The Palm Tree Hair Style*



## Ending at the Beginning

1948: India had achieved political independence. The British Raj had ended, a new era was beginning. Early in the year, Mahatma Gandhi had died, struck down by those who refused to admit that men who travel through life in different "boats" may still be "brothers" — Ed.

**D**uring the years which followed 1944 I was not able to renew my exploration of the Narmada. By the end of 1948, I had completed my time in India and was due to retire to England in the spring of 1949. Before I left, in October 1948, I paid one more farewell visit to Onkarji, and early in 1949 I travelled at last to Amarkantak and visited the source of the river which had given me so much.

As I have already said, my old friend Swami Nandgiri was no longer to be found at the Markandeshwar temple. Other things too were changing; Shastriji had only three students now in his little Vedic school. The librarian Ram Pareshar Pande, who still lived on Mandhata, welcomed me and told me the news. While I was there Gandhi Jayanti, the anniversary of Gandhi's birth, fell due. It was a national celebration, the first after Gandhi's death, and the Rajah

presided over a public meeting. There was a very sparse attendance; little Onkarji had always been remote from the political struggle, and for some of its priests and sadhus Gandhi was an ambiguous figure because of his championship of "untouchables". The local sweeper and his wife were a fair-skinned, good looking couple, with a delightful baby whom one of my medicines had helped — but they would be recognised for what they were and refused admission to the shrines.

There had been another tragedy among my Dhimar friends. Kunnu, whose skill with the circular net I have described, had the reputation of being rather a "black sheep", and had been accused of stealing a valuable fountain pen and swopping it for silver ornaments. The police had taken him for questioning to the room immediately below mine in the *dharmashala*, and somehow he had fallen from the window on to the precipitous rocks below and broken his back. He had died of his injuries, but when the police inspector questioned him during his last hours of consciousness he refused to blame the police or say anything that might get anyone into trouble. The man who told me this had a look in his eye which said "You may believe this or not, as you like", and some of Kunnu's fellow-Dhimars were more outspoken in their comments.

Nevertheless this last visit to Onkarji gave me treasured memories. It was then that I found the five-headed image of Ganesh, said to be the only one of its kind in India. It was then that I met a sadhu who, when I asked him why he had become a sadhu, replied reflectively that all who have the privilege of human birth should give some time to the contemplation of God. As the *Chaturmasya* was not yet over, there were no *parikrama-bāsis* coming and going, but one old man was spending the four-month period in the *dharmashala*; he had set up a little shrine there, before which he sat and chanted: *Hari Ram, Hari Ram, Ram Ram Hari Ram*.



### Amarkantak, 1949

It was nearly midnight, with a full moon, when the bullock cart came to a standstill outside the *dak* bungalow on the outskirts of the village of Pakariya. Around us was the forest, high above us the long line of the Maikal Range, black against the sky. We had travelled eleven miles from Pendra Road railway station. The bungalow was locked, the whole village asleep. The cartmen unloaded my luggage; I spread my blankets in a corner of the verandah and retired to bed. The men tied their bullocks to one of the verandah posts, lit a little fire and settled down for a final smoke. That done, they too were about to lie down when a panther strolled up and looked longingly at the bullocks; the men stirred their fire and coughed to show they were awake, the panther decided it was safer to look for a meal elsewhere.

Next morning I hired a *chamar* with a pony to carry my luggage up the last eight miles of forest track to Amarkantak. It was mid-January, the air was cold, jungle birds sang a morning chorus, the *palās*, "flame of the forest", glowed with its pointed flame-red flowers. Without a guide I should soon have been lost, for the track was steep and rough and often divided. We were not alone; from time to time parties of men, women and children, travelling in long single file, passed us by. They swung quickly along, singing as they went. For them these hills were home, they belonged to the local forest tribes, Gonds and Kurkus. We met another man alone, sadly driving some cattle; a tiger, he said, had killed two of his bullocks in the night. A little further on a sadhu was living in a tiny hut by a stream, protected from the tigers by a stockade; he gave me a warm welcome and some flowers from his garden.

I had fixed up with a new friend to join me at Amarkantak. He was a sadhu named Hari Narayan Basu, whom I had met a few months earlier at Badrinath. During the war he had held a well-paid Government post, and later an equally good position in a textile mill. But worldly success did not attract him; he had abandoned it all and become a

sadhu. He did not attach himself to any guru, but spent his time in meditation and study. I had just found a clean and welcoming *dharmashala* and arranged for accommodation there when he too arrived and found me out. There was no cooked food to be had in the village, for pilgrims cook their own. But food materials were for sale. Basuji being a Bengali knew all about cooking rice, and there was plenty of good milk; we lived for the whole of our stay on rich and nourishing *khir*.

An old priest named Ramadhin told us the story of the founding of the Amarkantak shrine: There was a poor Banjara named Rewa Nayak who made a living by selling jungle fruits in the nearest market. One night in a dream Mother Narmada appeared to him. "I want you to build a temple," she said, "over the spring where my river rises." "How can I fulfil your command?" he asked. "I am poor, and have no money." "Tell me what you have," she said. "Nothing except a few nuts," he replied, "to sell in the market tomorrow." "Go to sleep and don't worry," said the goddess. "You will find it will be all right." So Rewa Nayak went to sleep, and when he woke all his nuts had been changed into lumps of pure gold, and he had ample means to build the temple.

Around the spring which is the source of the river there is a masonry tank, forming a clear pool of irregular shape with steps leading down to the water. A bathe in this pool is said to bring great spiritual reward. I too bathed in it, because there was no other place to swim. The water at that season was bitterly cold, and I sought no reward except that "outward cleanliness" which is also required of a pilgrim. In the water are three buildings; one is the temple built above the spring, and dedicated to Shiva as Narmadeshwar; there is a second temple to Shiva as Amarkantakeshwar, and a small *chhatra* or pavilion in honour of Rewa Nayak. There are seventeen other temples close around the pool, all enclosed in a paved courtyard with a high stone wall. The two most important of these temples face one another with a common audience hall between them, one sacred to the goddess Narmada, the other to Shiva Amarnath.



A popular object of worship in the courtyard is a black stone elephant about three feet high. This has the same significance as the boar *avatar* at Barmān Ghat; if pilgrims can squeeze through the narrow space under the elephant's belly, it is a sign that their worship is accepted and their sins forgiven. The jungle folk, with their trim athletic figures, slipped through with comparative ease; others were visibly relieved when they found themselves safely out on the other side.

A short distance away, outside the enclosure, is another group of ancient temples which are no longer used for worship, and about a mile away through the forest is another spring, in a garden called *Mai Ki Bagiya*. The two springs are supposed to be connected, although the streams which flow from them run in opposite directions. In the garden there is a shrine, with some fruit trees; in the marshy ground near the stream were many *gulbakauri* plants. This plant is a kind of reed, and its flowers are highly valued in the treatment of some eye complaints. But it was not the flowering season, so I could not gather any.

Through thick jungle, but within easy walking distance, is the spring which is the source of the river Sōn. Basuji and I reached it soon after sunrise on our second morning. Just beyond it is the precipice over which the Narmada's "rejected suitor" flings himself. From the top of that cliff one may gaze over range after range of the hills of Chhattisgarh, spread out as far as the eye can see. Seated on the edge of the precipice, in the warmth of the morning sun, was a sadhu. He said that he spent his days in meditation there, and returned in the evening to his ashram near the village, where he lived with a *chela*. That evening he came to the *dharmashala* to see us, and invited us to visit him at his ashram on the following day.

The sadhu treated us with very great kindness. He confided to us that he had invented a private language of his own, in which he could discuss with his *chela* how to deal with visitors who made an unfavourable impression. As we

talked, we learned his history. His name was Baba Shohan Das; in his early days as a sadhu he had found a retreat at Kharraghat, near the rapids. Then he had moved a few miles upstream to Bandrabhan, where again there are rapids above the Tawa confluence. He had begun to suffer a good deal from rheumatism, and had been persuaded to smoke opium to relieve the pain. There came a time when he suddenly realised that he was going to the bad; at the next village festival, when the god was carried in procession and the people were bringing their offerings, he had brought all his opium-smoking equipment and thrown it into the god's lap, saying: "Here, you take all this!" From that moment he had never touched drugs again.

Shohan Das showed me his collection of curious jungle weapons, and produced the mango toffee which he kept for special occasions. When he heard that I was interested in the *gulbakauri* flowers he gave me some dried ones from his own stock. Sometime later, when I had settled in England, I wrote to him again. A reply came from his *chela* Rewa Das: fire had broken out one night, the little ashram had been totally destroyed, and soon afterwards Shohan Das had died.

I heard in the dharmashala of another sadhu who lived at the foot of the Kapildhāra waterfall, five miles down the river. He was said to be of venerable age and to subsist on a diet of earth and a little milk. I wanted to meet him, but time was short and I could not manage ten miles of very rough scrambling. Basuji paid him a quick visit. He found that the reports were not altogether accurate; the sadhu himself said that he lived on the offerings which people brought to him, but that if nothing were brought he would take a little earth to appease his hunger. In other words, he took what God sent him.

Our last evening had come. Basuji seated himself cross-legged on the plinth of one of the ancient disused temples. He remained there motionless, his face uplifted to the sky, till he was no more than a silhouette against the golden sunset. As darkness fell we rose, and mingled with the small crowd in



the audience hall of the Narmada temple. A lamp was lit, the white washed walls turned to gold. The worshippers passed their hands over the flame, and then over themselves and their friends, accepting in symbol the divine protection. Basuji too passed his hands over the flame, and then over my head and shoulders, in a prayer for my safety and welfare.

The next morning, as we started down the precipitous track back to Pakariya and the railway station, I rejoiced in the company of my fellow-pilgrim. Basuji is much younger than I, and affectionately calls me "father", but in those days together his inward maturity had stimulated and challenged me — so complete and willing was his renunciation, so great the faith and joy, the peace and the radiance, which he brought with him. We too were brothers.

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## Epilogue: from Anandwan to Narmada

Baba Amte has devoted many years to building up, in Maharashtra, a "community of compassion" which he has named Anandwan, the Place of Joy. Here there is a welcome for those who suffer from leprosy, whom the world has rejected; they are cared for, and find they are not alone. "Realising their own worth with their own hands," together they create "a new world of joy".

More than sixty years ago, when a student in Nagpur, the young Amte met Geoffrey Maw and was deeply impressed by his integrity. In May 1990 Amte was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. Unable through age and infirmity to travel to London to receive it in person, he sent a message of acceptance; he has kindly given permission for extracts to be quoted.

Amte spoke of those who had inspired him: Tathagata, (the Buddha) whose compassion embraced all living beings; and the Suffering Servant (Christ), who "brought a new dawn to my life. He commanded me to go out and help, in a personal way, the tired and bewildered, the poor and lonely." He was inspired also by the Indian leaders of his own day: "Gandhiji, Sane Guruji and Vinoba came into my life, with a shining sense of moral purpose."

So Anandwan came into being, and along with it grew a compassion which like the Buddha's embraced all living beings. "At Anandwan," Amte writes, "we have a memorial to an anonymous tree. I lie and listen to the whisperings from its grave, which are a message of renewal: 'I have known the drowsiness of every autumn and the passions of every spring.' For when a tree sheds its leaves, the ignorant mourn the death of the leaves, the wise celebrate the birth of living humus to feed the young new leaves of the future... Trees,

birds, animals, mountains, rivers, all part of the immense munificence of life."

Baba Amte then goes on: "I have learned that real leprosy is not in the body but in the mind. The physical signs of leprosy are a hypo-pigmented patch and a loss of sensation. There are those among the "healthy" who look upon the worst injustice and poverty and are not moved; that psychological anesthesia is worse than physical leprosy. That is mental leprosy, loss of feeling, insensitivity."

Greed and self-seeking make men insensitive, lead to aggression, the aggression expressed in life-destroying atomic reactors, industrial pollution, large dams. "How long are we going to watch passively as all that is our common heritage is destroyed and lost for ever in the name of 'development'? Today I have become part of the battle to save the Narmada, one of the most sacred rivers in India, from massive dams which would destroy a whole way of life that depends on the river and its life-sustaining water. The battle is not for the Narmada alone, it has an even larger meaning. The battle is for the whole earth, to stop the immorality of destructive 'development' and replace it with a new vision, a new way of human living.

"We must seek a path of greater kindness, tolerance and respect for all forms of life; a way of living founded on compassion, which seeks sufficiency for all rather than superfluity for some. *Real* development is natural. Look at the honey-bee. Its treasure of nectar is not obtained at the cost of the flower. By extracting the honey it helps the true 'development' of the flower. This, the way of nature, is the only basis for real development; it is our solemn responsibility to preserve and enrich our natural heritage for the sake of children yet to be born. From the Narmada Valley with its children, with its streams and flowers and woods, I send you my warmest greetings."



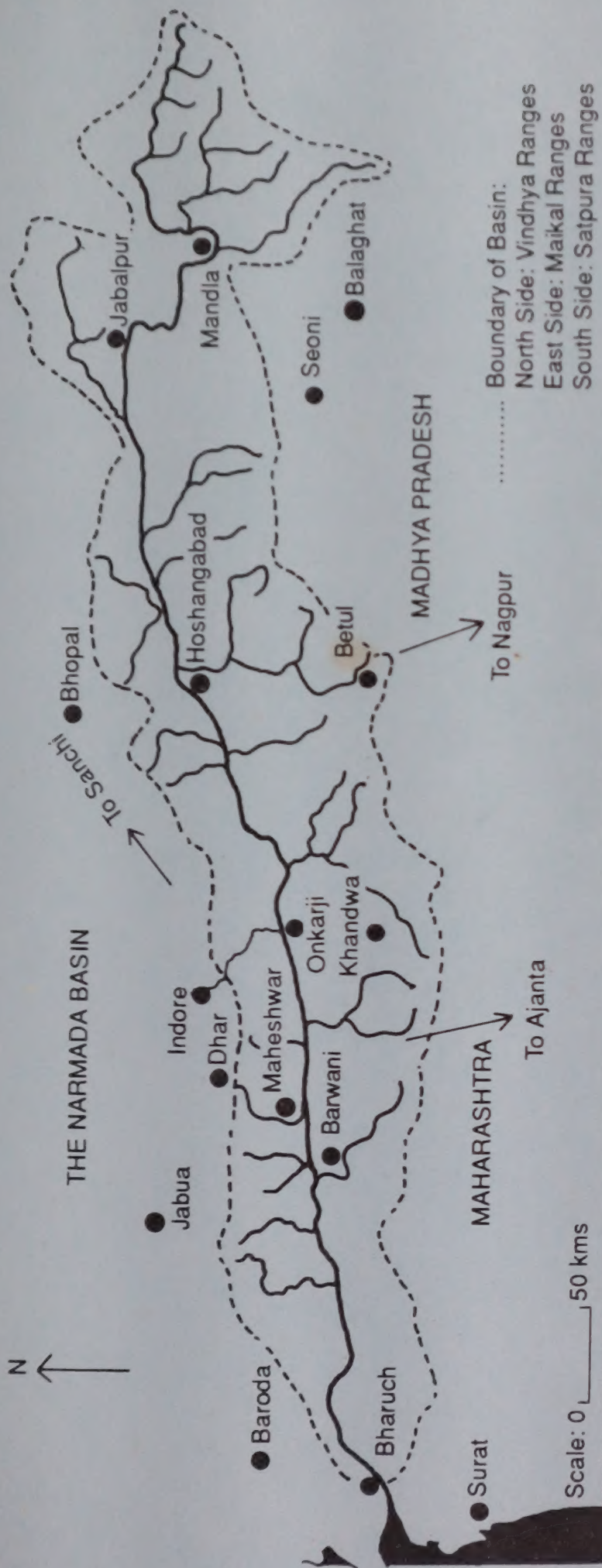
## A Glossary of Indian Words used in the Text

|                    |   |  |
|--------------------|---|--|
| <i>arti</i>        | : | an offering of lights in worship.  |
| <i>avatar</i>      | : | an incarnation of the divine; it may take animal or human form.  |
| <i>chamar</i>      | : | the caste of leather-workers.  |
| <i>chaprassi</i>   | : | attendant in a royal court or government office.   |
| <i>chela</i>       | : | disciple who attends on his guru's needs.  |
| <i>dak</i>         | : | the postal service.  |
| <i>darshan</i>     | : | literally "vision"; especially the sight of a holy place or person.  |
| <i>dharmashala</i> | : | a lodging house for pilgrims, often built as an act of charity by a wealthy devotee.   |
| <i>dhoti</i>       | : | waist cloth worn by a man.   |
| <i>ghat</i>        | : | a step; steps down into the water of a river or bathing pool; also, mountains rising in successive steps.  |
| <i>ghee</i>        | : | clarified butter, which does not become rancid.  |
| <i>lingam</i>      | : | the conical stone used as a symbol of the god Shiva. <i>Jyotirlinga(m)</i> ( <i>lingam</i> of light) are those installed at twelve places regarded as of special sanctity. |
| <i>lota</i>        | : | a vase-shaped brass vessel used for drinking etc.  |

*Narmada: The Life of a River*

- Mahabharata* : The great Indian epic which is a treasury of legend and tradition.
- mela* : A fair held on some special anniversary or festival.
- mukut* : a crown.
- pagri* : a form of turban.
- phulka* : a small light fried "pancake".
- puri* : a larger "pancake". Similar to *phulka*.
- rishi* : a seer, a man of holy wisdom.
- rudraksha* : a round hard seed used for the beads of the rosary worn by the devotees of Shiva.
- sanyasi* : one who is "emptied" of all possessions, in the fourth and last stage of human life.
- shastras* : the sacred books of Hinduism.
- Sita ban* : "The forest of Sita", where she is said to have lived in exile with her husband Rama.
- tapasya* : austerities undertaken as a religious discipline.
- tirth(a)* : a sacred place blessed by the presence of God.
- yojana* : a measure of distance; usage varies, the minimum figure is five miles.





*The Narmada Basin*

**T**his little book is an account of explorations of the many holy places along the course of the Narmada river in Central India, and of the pilgrims, holy men and others who were encountered there. The writer was a Quaker worker who lived for many years at Hoshangabad on the high south bank of the river, and grew to love it for its varied natural beauty and for the romance of its legends and its history. Fifty years old as the record is, it is fresh and alive today.

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